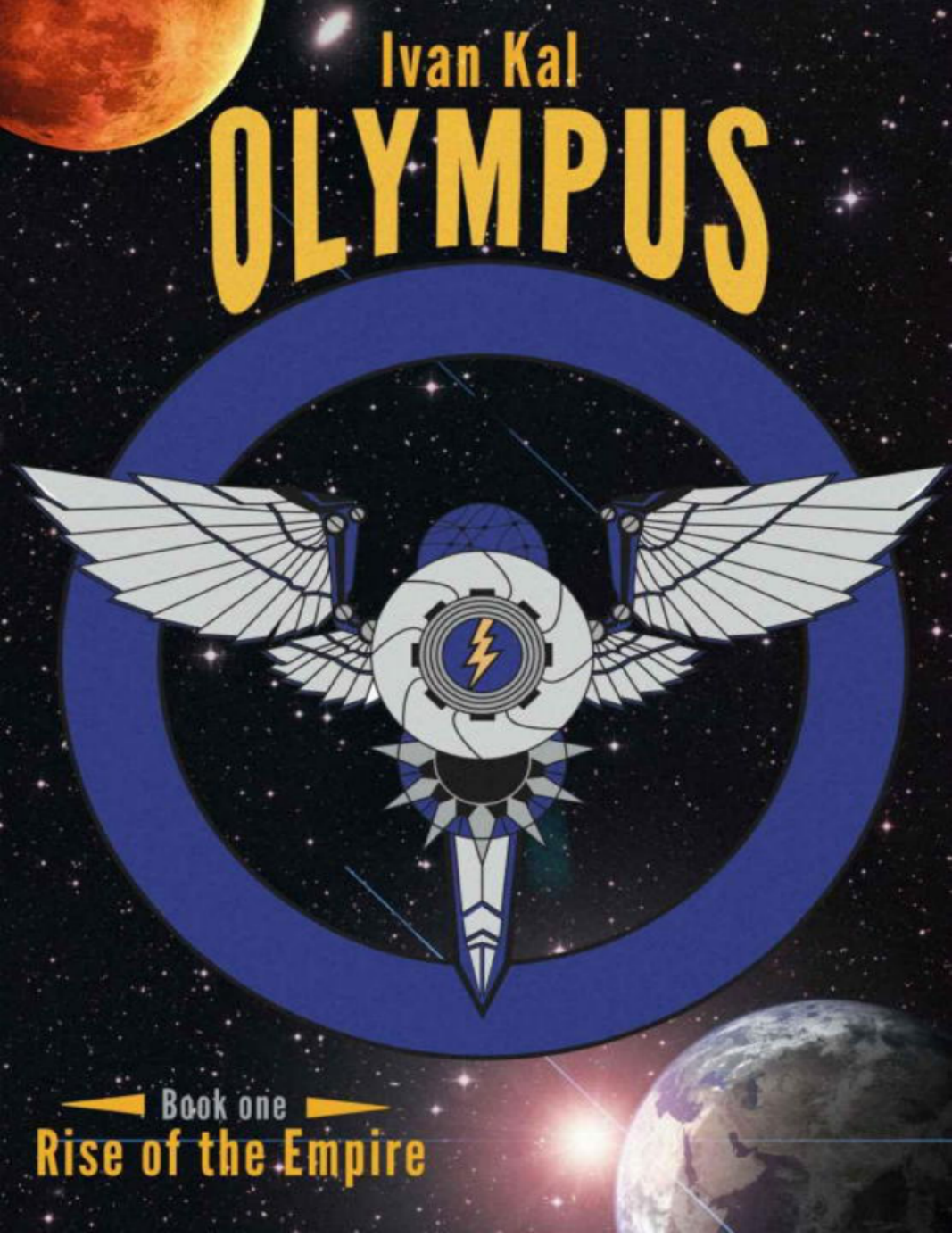
Ivan Kal
OLYMPUS
Book one
Rise of the Empire

SHOUT
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IT

Annotation

The year is 2081.
Earth is recovering from a devastating nuclear war.
An age of technological advancement.
A find at the bottom of the Ocean.
A man driven by a dream.
The time for humanity to reach to the stars is now.

A find provides Tomas Klein with the tools to speed up his timetable and execute his plans.

He will reach for the stars, the only question is will humanity follow?

Adrian Farkas an orphan boy, is given opportunity to change his bleak future.

To go to space, and shape the future of all mankind.

Will he rise up to the challenge?

***Olympus* is 73,000 word novel and the first book in the "Rise of the Empire" series, it sets the stage and introduces the characters for the books to come, the series will follow humanity as it takes its first steps into the Solar system and beyond, becoming a true galaxy spanning empire.**

***Rise of the Empire Book 2 – Rebellion* coming November 2014**

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Ivan Kal
OLYMPUS

Timeline

December 2018 – World economy approaching collapsing point, unemployment at an all-time high.

April 2019 – Corruption and economic failing brings about the collapse of the European Union, United States struggles with ever increasing number of homeless, Europe struggles with food shortages.

July 2020 – With the collapse of the EU most countries are forced to implement population control, food and water shortages increasing, price of water skyrockets. North African countries declare bankruptcy.

February 2021 – Natural oil and gas reserves approaching depletion. United States increases their presence in the Middle East, along with Russia and China. Relations between China and India deteriorate.

November 2021 – African and South American countries reach bankruptcy points, people start rioting. Australia and Indonesian countries invest into solar, sea water, and thermal power research, they start building hydroponic and agroponic industries. Relations between Russia and United States deteriorate, China and India declare war.

January 2022 – Russian military enters Iraq and Iran, United States responds by declaring war on Russian Federation, Middle East becomes battle ground.

February 2022 – UN tries to end the conflicts peacefully, most member countries unable to divert resources from their own problems. United States, Russia, China, India and other countries involved in the conflict withdraw from UN.

May 2022 – UN and NATO dissolved, European countries approach bankruptcy points.

Jun 2022 – United Kingdom joins the Middle Eastern war on the side of United States.

March 2024 – Australia and Indonesian countries sign a pact, creating the League.

December 2024 – The League builds first hydrothermal power plant on the ocean bed in the Southern Ocean.

January 2025 – United States forms an alliance with the UK and India, European and African countries struggle with food, water and oil shortages.

March 2025 – United States soldiers bomb Iranian village due to faulty information, killing hundreds of innocent civilians. Using that as an excuse, Russian Federation arms their nuclear arsenal and points it at US major cities threatening to fire unless the US and their allies withdraw from Middle East, with the dissolvent of UN and NATO

there is no world governing body to prevent them, US arms their arsenal as well.

April 2025 – Remaining nuclear capable countries involved in the conflict arm their armament.

May 2025 – Russian Federation fires their nuclear missiles, US defense network isn't able to shot them all down, western coast totally destroyed, US fires their missiles in response, within hours both countries mayor cities are destroyed. India fires their nuclear weapons at China totally destroying most of their mayor cities. China subjected to sabotage, unable to fire all of their arsenal.

July 2025 – Death count in the billion rising each day, millions more infected with radiation sickness, China becomes a wasteland. Refugees from the US west coast move to the east and south into Mexico and Southern America, Russian refugees move to Siberia, hard conditions add to the death count, few remaining Chinese refugees are given aid and living space in the League. Radiation clouds move to India killing millions.

August 2026 – Final death count approaching three billion. Shock from loss of life forces all involved parties to sign a peace treaty, retreating from war torn Middle East.

October 2026 – Accord of Life signed all countries agree never again to use nuclear weapons on Earth soil.

January 2030 – Germany offers financial aid to other European countries, and proposes a union of all European countries into a single entity. Already desperate, all save for UK, Spain, France and Italy accept the offer.

March – September 2030 – A new country is formed, all governments abolished, elections on various matters held. English accepted as primary speaking language, former prime minister of Germany Jonas Bauer voted and appointed as President of this new state, which took the name Concordis – Latin for united. A new governing system implemented, Concordis split into three regions North – Scandinavia and the rest of former Baltic countries, Central – countries of former central Europe, and South – Balkan Peninsula. Each region elected a single representative, the council of three was created, with the power to overrule any presidential decision if all were in agreement.

February 2031 – League starts to export food and power to other countries in Asia and Europe.

August 2033 – Concordis economy stabilizes, quality of life improves. People not living in the League or Concordis suffer. Concordis starts their own hydroponic program on a large scale, most of fertile land allocated to farming. Water refining programs started. Underground lakes taped for water.

November 2035 – Radiation clouds over Asia and North America dissipate.

December 2035 – August 2039 – US, India, Russia and UK pool their remaining resources and begin to clean up the nuclear waste left by the war. Their economies slowly start to stabilize.

March 2040 – Olympus Corporation founded in Concordis southern region, primarily focuses on development of new technology.

September 2041 – League and Concordis finally able to sustain their populations and send aid to critical regions, League sends food packages to Asia, Concordis to Africa.

February 2042 – November 2046 – Olympus buys the designs for the Leagues thermal power plants. Starts research on underwater habitats and development. Olympus builds first underwater farms at the bottom of Atlantic Ocean powered by thermal plants. Olympus invests into genetic research, hoping to improve crop yields, and battle radiation sickness in refugees.

August 2047 – Olympus starts mining the Atlantic Ocean's bed for metals and oil. League does the same in the Pacific.

January 2048 – African countries unite and jointly ask for the inclusion in Concordis, following their example Asian countries except Russia and India, do the same with the League, and are accepted. The Middle Eastern countries remain independent.

July 2048 – November 2054 – Conditions everywhere begin to improve, the League and Concordis enter a time of technological advancement, Olympus develops first brain implants intended to help people with their everyday lives.

February 2056 – January 2070 – Olympus builds first underwater city at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, it is named Nephthys. Population control is removed.

March 2074 – January 2081 – Implant technology now wide spread throughout Concordis and League. North and South American countries reach their prewar states.

Part One – The Find

Chapter One

February 2081

Michael Jorgenson reached to the panel above his head, then switched the exterior lights on, and raised the front covering so that he could see outside of the sub. He liked to do that sometimes, though he didn't need to. The Olympus searcher submarine Merman, like the military submarines of the last century navigated mostly by sonar and other sensors that were developed in the past twenty years, but Michael liked to watch the water, its emptiness soothed him. Sometimes he swore that he could see movements out there at the edge of his vision. There were of course life forms here at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, but they tended to stay away from Olympus subs.

"Oh god! You are doing it again!" Peter Manes said from his post at the sensor station.

"I like looking at the ocean." Michael replied sullenly.

"Well, normal people like me, are creeped out. All that nothingness, it's weird, you are looking but you don't see anything." Peter responded shivering.

"Then don't look."

"I can't not look." Peter said exasperated.

"Well then shut up and watch the screens."

They spent the next ten minutes in silence, Michael stared into the dark ocean, there was nothing to see of course, they were seven hundred meters above the ocean floor, there was nothing around them but water, and the lights couldn't illuminate more than a couple meters in front of them. From time to time he would catch glimpse of something out there moving fast, on the outskirts of his vision. He tried to follow it with his eyes, trying to discern what it is, what it looked like. Much of the oceans remained unexplored, and its life unknown. Most of the underwater cities were built close to the coast, and most of the Concordis cities were in the Mediterranean, with only two cities built in the Atlantic, and both were placed at around ninety kilometers from the coast, and the League had only one underwater city. Olympus had many mining operations in the Atlantic, but none of them were anywhere close to the depth the Merman was currently at. The Merman was slowly mapping the bottom of West European Basin, at the depth of four kilometers. The searcher class submarines were equipped with state of the art sensors, which made Michaels and Peters job easier, they were meant to map the ocean floor, discover metal reserves, and discern if it was profitable for a mining operation to be constructed here, if it was, a message was sent to Olympus

headquarters in Nephthys, if not, the deposits were marked and coordinates sent to their base in Sedna, the second city built in the Atlantic. It was a boring job, with sensors and computers doing most of the work, the only reason for a crew was that the computer couldn't be programed for all eventualities, so the crew was more of a failsafe.

"That's strange." Peter said and snapped Michael out of his reverie.

"What?"

"I just got a signal, but it's strange…" Peter answered taping his screen,

"Strange how, we get bounced signals all the time, that's how we know we found something."

"Yes, but the signals deteriorate as they move through water, or as they bounce of metals or rock. This signal isn't deteriorated at all." Peter said dumbfounded.

"What do you mean? Is it a glitch?"

"No, I've verified that the signal is coming from the outside, and it is our signal, but it seems that it was boosted. And it's not a returned signal, whatever it is, it's broadcasting continuously at us."

"So what, another sub caught our signal, boosted it and sent it back to screw with us?" Michael said maybe more harshly than he needed, but this was starting to creep him out, open viewer might have had something to add to the atmosphere.

Peter didn't seem to notice his tone, he was completely engrossed at his station, furiously taping his screen, bringing up various graphs and running the signal through the computer "No, baring the fact that there isn't another sub anywhere near our position, our submarines don't have the capability to send a signal through water without it deteriorating, that's why we go to the surface to get into contact with the base."

"The League, or the Americans?" Michael asked in a low voice.

"No, the League is on par with us, our equipment might even be slightly better and we couldn't do this, and the Americans are at least a decade behind us technologically, they are still recovering from the war." Peter raised his head and looked at Michael. "I've found the source." Peter said.

Michael looked at his friend; he saw the same emotion there that was starting to creep into him, fear. He swallowed and asked. "Where is it?"

"The signal is originating some fifteen hundred meters in front of us, from the ocean floor."

"Can you tell what it is?"

"There is some kind of interference with the sonar, all I'm getting is rock formations, and it's absorbing any signal I try to send, it's like

they just disappear. But we know that there is something, since whatever is there is broadcasting."

"Could it be something natural? A strange fish, or something." Michael asked, grasping for anything to make sense of the situation.

"I don't know, there are a lot of strange creatures in the world, some can create electricity or mimic different sounds, but radio signals? It's true that Earth's Oceans are the least explored part of our planet and that there are strange and different beings living here at the bottom of the Oceans more than anywhere else, but I just can't see a living organism having the capability to catch radio signals and then aim them and broadcast them, not to mention that it would need to have organs specifically designed to do just that, I mean an entirely biological beacon it wo—"

"Peter stop!" Michael said, he recognized his friend's dealing mechanism, whenever he became nervous or afraid he had the tendency to ramble on. "What you are trying to say, is that it can't be any kind of life form, and must be something man built, correct? Yes, well then, if it isn't another sub, it could be some top secret project of Olympus, seeing as you said it had some absorbing qualities, maybe some kind of stealth or something." Michael said, trying to explain the situation through logic.

"Well, yes, yes it could be something like that. Yes, yes, even though I don't think that we have anything near that kind of capability, nor does anyone else, but yes, yes if it is a top secret project we wouldn't know about it right? Yes they would keep it a secret an—"

"PETER!" Michael said again to snap his friend back. "Focus Peter, if it is something of ours, and is top secret, then they wouldn't have sent our signal back at us, so the only thing that makes sense is that they had some kind of complications. Maybe the only thing they can send is our own signal, and are trying to get our attention. There might be people there trapped with no way of sending a message out." Michael tried to convince that what he was about to do, is a correct decision. "We need to go and check, see what we find."

"Michael, this sub isn't equipped to carry out rescue operations."

"Maybe so, but we need to verify the situation, if there is need for rescue, we'll surface, and call for help."

Peter hesitated a beat, and then nodded "Yeah, ok." He whispered. Michael knew his friend was scared, he was as well, but he also knew that as long there was a chance that there was someone in need of help he couldn't just turn his back and walk away. He took control of the sub from the computer and set a new course. It took just under four minutes to get to the origin of the signal.

"Where is it?" Michael said, there was nothing but rock in front of

them, at least as much as he could see, they were just a couple of meters away from the coordinates Peter sent to his screen.

“It’s coming from the rock. Whatever is transmitting is buried inside the rock.”

“Alright, I’ll go around let’s see if we can find an entrance of something.”

Michael moved the sub around trying to find anything that might explain the signal they were getting, the sensors were useless, anything they sent towards the rock got immediately absorbed, yet the signal they received was still coming strong. The reflectors outside shined pale white light on the rock as the sub moved, there was nothing that looked out of place, no cave entrance, nothing.

“Wait, what was that? Turn around.” Peter said jumping out of his chair and coming to Michael’s.

“Where?”

“Back, on the right.”

Michael turned the sub, but he saw nothing but rock. “What? I don’t see anything, it’s all just ro— Oh.”

Michael just stared at the sight in front of him.

“I guess we better go to the surface and call headquarters.”

“Yeah.” Peter agreed.

Chapter Two

October 2081

Tomas Klein CEO of Olympus was anxious, which was rare for him. Being one of the most powerful men in the world, certainly the wealthiest, he had little reason to be anxious about anything, but he has been waiting for this for the past eight months, ever since that day when his second came to his office and told him about the find on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. The moment he heard, and truly understood what it was, he wanted to drop everything and fly to the location and inspect the find by himself, but his staff managed to convince him that waiting was the most prudent course of action. He was very much in the public eye, his movements very closely followed, and anything he was interested in immediately got the interest of the entire World. It took same careful planning and a body double to get him from Nephthys to Sedna, the city in the Atlantic in secret. And now as Olympus transport flew over the Ocean, on a course for the surface platform of the city, his hands trembled slightly, not form fear but from excitement, his childhood dream was about to be fulfilled. It was his dream to reach beyond this overpopulated Earth, to travel between stars, to find new worlds, new beings, if such even existed, and now hopefully, he held the answer to all of those questions. Eight months ago, Olympus sub stumbled upon a find that had the potential to shake the entire world. They found a spaceship, his people said that it couldn't be anything else, and Olympus hired only the best. According to them, its design didn't make sense for a submarine, it was first assumed that it was a relic of the past, before the war, some secret project that was forgotten, but after the first experts got at the scene and inspected the find directly they found that it was far older than that, tens of thousands years older to be more precise. With it being so old it couldn't have been made by human hands, there were of course theories about Atlantis at first, but as soon as the find was transferred to a secure facility at Sedna all those theories were shot down. His best people quickly all come to the same conclusion; it was made for space travel. And then countless new theories popped up. Where did it come from? Why was it here? And most importantly, whom did it belong to? It was made from a metal unknown to Earths science, and was impervious to anything they tried to open it with, though their choices were limited as they didn't want to damage anything, and Tomas forbade anything more powerful fearing that they would hit something they weren't supposed to and blow themselves up. And four days ago his people managed to open, what they believed to be a cargo door. He didn't know the details on

how, but as soon as he found out that they had a way inside, which was one minute after the door opened, he forbade anyone from entering, as he wanted to be there personally when they went inside.

His transport finally arrived at its destination, and smoothly lowered itself down on the pad. The airplanes of old have all been mostly replaced, at least in Concordis and League, the American continents still had airplane travel, but any travel between there and the League or Concordis was by Eagle class transports. The technology was mostly there even before the war, hover ability, vertical liftoff and landing, and faster speeds, not to mention their greater reliability. Olympus was the first to start producing them and couple of League companies saw the opportunity and grabbed on as well. They looked reminiscent of the old Japanese Kawasaki C-1 military transports a bit blockier in appearance, without the back tail were instead the engines were situated, with two big turbines bellow the wings that were turned towards the ground, and with two exhausts on the wings top. There were of course many variants, based on their purpose, commercial, cargo, military and those designed specifically for Olympus use. The Eagle transports were all mostly larger than the old commercial airplanes, again, different variants had different dimensions, but most fell into ninety to hundred and twenty meters range, with the advances in technology, the space inside the transports was again increased, so the new transports could carry at least twice as much as the old airplanes of the same length.

“Tomas, we’ve arrived.” Elias Bakas, his second and head of security said from the seat beside him.

Tomas nodded, and stood up. The platform at the back of the transport slowly lowered and revealed the surface platform of Sedna city. There were two people waiting for them, Nathan Jansen the mayor of Sedna was one of them. Nathan was also a high level Olympus employee, all the cities built by Olympus were run by their employees, all were highly capable and most importantly loyal to Olympus first and Concordis second. Even though the cities are considered Concordis property by anyone outside of Concordis government, even the citizens of Concordis believed that. In truth, the cities were leased to Concordis, the deal that Tomas made with the government was very clear, the cities were going to be populated by people from Concordis, but the running of the cities would be entirely up to Olympus personnel, there would be no politics involved there. Tomas has worked hard to make Olympus what it was today, the company was not like other companies, it was completely run and owned by Tomas, with a few of his closest friends which helped him start it owning some small part. It was more of monarchy than a company, and he ruled it all, Olympus had achieved monopoly in

many different areas, it had many subsidiaries in all parts of the world. The Concordis market was mostly run by them, with very few companies being able to keep up with them, and only because the government aided them as much as it could, early on when Olympus was just created, and under his leadership started to swallow the broken market and repair it under his guidance, the government realized that Tomas was set on dominating the world economy and feared that very fragile world peace could be broken. But Tomas wasn't a man motivated by money or power, he understood that they were just tools with which he could accomplish his goals. What motivated Tomas was hunger for knowledge, the need for advancement, not just of himself but of the entire human race, he wanted to unite the world, and he knew that as long as greedy governments existed, it was never going to happen. The creation of the League and Concordis gave him a tiny bit of hope that the humanity could someday become what he envisioned it to be, but it was still not enough. Olympus was his solution to the problem, a way to control and guide the world without having to play with politics, or not as much, he learned over his seventy one years of life that one can never entirely escape it.

He strode purposely down the ramp, his steps confident and his posture flawless. Tomas Klein was seventy one years old, but looked as if he was in his late twenties. Olympus had made many strides in prolonging the human lifespan. The world was still over populated, resources in the League and Concordis might have reached the point where population control was no longer necessary, but their level was still not enough to feed the entire world population, many still died of hunger and thirst in Russia, and the American continents, as well in the countries that refused to join with the now largest powers in the world. He released a treatment that effectively erased aging period prior to death. People were now expected to live at least a hundred and fifty years, though only in the League and Concordis, the body no longer aged slowly after the point of were growth ends, instead people were expected to age rapidly in their last few years, with as little suffering as possible prior to death. People still died of disease or unnatural causes, but even that has been reduced greatly, at least in Concordis. The war changed many things, people realized how close to the death of our entire race we really got, the leaders knew that as long as their countries put themselves first and world second, there would always be wars, and one of them will end them all. The creation of Concordis and the League went a long way towards making sure that never happened. People who lived there were happier, and their leaders worked towards making sure that every single citizen had a full life, to a point that there was no poverty. The

two countries worked closely together, they both used the same currency, the credit, had the same economic structure, and both shared the technology that could be used to enhance the lives of their people. Olympus had presence all over the world, though mostly in the Concordis and the League, the countries that chose to retain their own identities worked to minimize the level of presence Olympus could have there.

Tomas reached the welcoming party with his security detail following close behind

"Nathan, it's been too long." Tomas said as he shook Nathans hand.

"Seven years, it's funny, but it doesn't seem that long, and you of course look the same."

"As do you, and what are seven years compared to more than a hundred."

"A drop in the ocean," Nathan smiled slightly, and then nodded towards Elias "Mr. Bakas"

"Mayor." Elias nodded back.

"Tomas, I believe that you are acquainted with Professor Hyeon Seo-yun, who is a consultant on our little project." Nathan gestured to the woman standing beside him, Tomas of course already knew her. She like most every other person in Concordis looked like she was in her twenties, she was an attractive woman, of Korean heritage, with straight brown hair tied in a tail and brown eyes, though the pictures from her file failed to convey the full depth of intelligence that shone from her eyes. She had degrees in many areas, she was a professor of astrophysics and astronomy, with her other degrees including such as thermodynamics and robotics. Based on her file she was close to eighty years old, ten years older than Tomas, and one of the brightest minds in the world. Tomas has been trying to bring her into the Olympus family for the past twenty years, she refused all his offers, saying that working for Olympus had no interest or challenge for her, and Tomas had offered her more than he had offered anyone else. He had made it a sort of a quest for himself, to bring her into the company, Tomas could wait a long time to reach his goals, and he had all the time in the world.

"Professor Hyeon, I must say that it gives me immense pleasure seeing you in Olympus uniform." Tomas smiled slightly.

"Humph, yes, I imagine it would for someone like you." She said in return with a tight smile on her face that somehow managed to convey utmost contempt for him.

"Oh, someone like me?"

"Yes, a person with a pathological need to control everything he lays his eyes on, person with delusions of grandeur, in other words a

megalomaniac." Her words were followed by absolute silence and wide eyed looks of the rest of the party turned towards her, Tomas could appreciate honesty, he rarely got it from his subordinates, he found it refreshing.

"Why, thank you Professor that was exactly what I was going for." He smiled widely, and then turned back to Nathan, but not before seeing the shocked look on the Professor's face.

"Lead the way Nathan, I'm eager to proceed."

"Of course Tomas, this way please."

They entered the elevator in silence, and after Nathan provided the terminal with right codes started moving down, towards the city, a few times they could feel the elevator slowing and moving sideways, meaning that they changed shafts, the project facility was at the bottom of the ocean, a few kilometers outside of the cities limit, it was listed as a storage facility which explained the less frequent traffic to and from the facility.

After a few minutes Nathan finally broke the awkward silence "As per your instructions, no one has entered the ship, since the doors opened, and security has been placed on red alert we—"

"Wait, since the door opened? You mean to tell me that the door opened on its own?" Tomas asked sharply, that wasn't included in the report, and now that he thought about it the actual opening of the door was described rather vaguely, all Tomas was interested was that the door was opened, and didn't really focus much on the means of how, stupid of him really, but he was very much excited about a prospect of exploring the spaceship that it slipped his mind, he mentally issued commands to his implant, recording this entire incident and making sure that another such oversight doesn't happen again.

"Well we aren't really su—" Nathan started nervously but was interrupted by Professor Hyeon.

"The events surrounding the opening of the door are somewhat unclear, and we can't say with a hundred percent certainty what happened until we enter the ship, but what we do know is that a technician was working on trying to open what we believed to be an access hatch, the technician was frustrated and in a fit of helplessness yelled at the ship to "open the door", though he didn't use that exact wording nor proper language, after which the door lowered."

"You are telling me that we have an unknown ship under power inside our facility, a ship that seemingly opened a door on its own? And you didn't see it prudent to inform me about it!?" Tomas said raising his voice slightly, and letting a touch of steel to slide inside his tone, tone which he used when he was very displeased.

"I have presented the mayor with my recommendation, which

was for a science and security team to enter the ship, and the facility to be evacuated immediately. I assumed that you had denied my request director." Professor Hyeon said in a voice that made her previous remark clear to Tomas, she believed that he had knowingly endangered his people just so that he could have a chance to enter the ship first.

"Nathan." Tomas turned to the mayor of Sedna.

Nathan's face had turned white and he nervously looked around to the other faces in the elevator with them, the Professor had her superior mask on while Elias had his usual uninterested face on, seeing how he wouldn't get any help from them Nathan turned back to Tomas "Ah, we – when I informed you about the situation, y-you ordered that no one goes inside u-until you got here, I— I just followed your orders sir— ah director." Nathan said dropping the familiar tone he used earlier. By the end of his speech Nathans eyes were fixed on the floor, while he nervously rubbed his palms against his uniform.

"Yes, I gave you orders, orders I made without all the information I was supposed to have, if you had told me the circumstances I would have reacted much differently. A part of the blame lies with me, for not asking for an elaboration, but a much greater part lies with you for withholding it from me. I have placed you in the position of leadership, because I trusted your judgment and capability, trust that you have now lost. I don't need sheep who are too cowardly to tell me to my face when I'm in the wrong. You are dismissed from your position effective immediately; your second will replace you until such a time when I can choose a suitable replacement."

"B-but sir, please I was ju—" Elias's hand on his shoulder silenced his attempt at an argument and coaxed out a soft "Yes sir."

Chapter Three

The rest of the ride was spent in silence that was even more awkward than the one before. There was one thing that Tomas hated more than anything else, and that was incompetence from competent people. He could understand when the people who didn't have the drive to do their best, to rise above all others, who didn't have the means nor abilities to succeed acted incompetent, but when someone who had decades to rise and better themselves, made the same mistake, that was another matter entirely. He could forgive someone even if they made such an mistake, even he made mistakes from time to time, but when one tried to place the blame on others or to justify his mistake when that mistake put people in their charge in danger then it was much harder to forgive. Tomas was running an empire and he needed competent trustworthy people who would tell him things he needed to hear, not things they thought he wanted to hear, because at the end of the day he made his decisions based on information provided to him by those who worked for him.

Finally the elevator stopped and the door opened. There were two security officers standing in front of it along with two other members of the project. They stepped forward to great them but before they got the chance Tomas turned to Nathan.

"Take the elevator up to your former office and inform your second of the change in the position, afterward remain in the city until you are informed of your next position."

Nathans eyes widened a bit at his words, most likely he believed that he would be fired. Tomas had other things in plan for him, even though he would not have as high position as he had until now, Nathan will have a chance to prove his worth again, even though he made a mistake, he was still a very capable employee and Tomas didn't want to lose someone who might still prove useful. Hopefully he would learn from this mistake.

"Yes sir, thank you sir." Nathan nodded his in thanks, gratitude clear in his demeanor. Good, that meant that he at least realized his mistake.

Tomas nodded back and then turned to the people waiting for them. They were obviously interested in what had just happened, but not enough to ask anything about it. Professor Hyeon left the elevator alongside Tomas closely followed by Elias.

"Director Klein, it's a pleasure to finally meet you, my name is Marcus Bearn I'm in charge of the team that will be working on deciphering the objects technology, this is my second Maria Nunez."

Tomas shook their hands and tipped his head towards the security

officers who tipped theirs back. Olympus security was a vast enterprise by itself, in fact it was a private military, though Tomas had gone to great lengths to ensure that stayed a secret only known to him and his few trusted fellows. As far as the rest of the world was concerned it was a security subdivision of Olympus, providing security to their clients and Olympus assets. Tomas wasn't set on a rigid command relationship between himself and his subordinates, he did expect that they follow orders but also that they think for themselves and voice their concerns to him when it was appropriate, though judging from the incident a few minutes ago he didn't completely succeed. The security division was completely loyal to him; the problems arose with his "nonmilitary" departments. Frankly they were too scared to tell him anything they perceived would make him angry. A big part of that came from their image of him, image he worked hard to create, he had to in order to accomplish what he did, but that was only his mask towards the outside world, his security understood that but then they had the advantage of always being near him, Elias or someone from his team were always beside him, watching, protecting from the shadows. Elias also acted as his second and no doubt passed all his impressions about him down to his subordinates. The practice of second was implemented by Tomas more than thirty years ago, as a way to maximize productivity of his enterprise. The seconds were regarded as assistants by the general public, but what they didn't realize was that seconds were in fact advisors, confidants, partners who in fact had the same power as their "firsts".

"Pleasure, lead the way, I believe you have already waited long enough for me to get here." Tomas said.

"True that, if you would follow me director." Marcus said as he started walking down the hallway.

"I must thank you in the name of everyone here for trusting us enough to bring us in on this project, director." Maria said as they walked.

"There is no need Miss Nunez, every person involved in this project is here because they are the best." Tomas replied.

"Well, I believe that gratitude is appropriate anyways, the chance to work on something so monumental, that could change the world is really once in life time opportunity." She replied.

"You are welcome then. I hope that you will give this project your best."

"Certainly sir, never doubt."

They went pass two security checkpoints before finally arriving at the big hangar that held the spaceship, it was on a level below them and they approached the railing to take a better look. The ship looked unlike anything he had seen before, it was yellowish in color which

glistened as if it was just applied, and there was no damage on its hull which would indicate the reason for its location on the bottom of the ocean. The ship wasn't as big as Tomas thought it would be, perhaps a hundred meters in length, and forty wide at its widest point, with about fifteen in height. Basically not much bigger than the Eagle class transport. It was sleek with its back being the widest and the highest where the engines where situated, the hull then dropped at low angle towards the bow that ended in a sharp point, it looked vaguely like a talon.

"It's impressive." Tomas said after a moment.

"Yes it is, we still can't figure out what type of alloy the hull is made of. We know that it is stronger than anything we have, though not as much as we expected, but it does have some other qualities like being highly resistant to heat, and no sensory equipment we have can penetrate inside, even with the door opened it seems like it's giving of a kind of a dampening field, though we don't know if it is being generated from a device inside, or if it is coming from the hull itself. And when the door were opened the inside of the ship was filled with new air, while the old one was released outside, the composition of which was the same as ours." Marcus said.

Tomas looked at the ship for another moment and then turned to Elias.

"Go to security, form a five man team, take someone who understands computers and someone who is well versed in languages, we'll go inside when you are ready." Being a part of Olympus security wasn't only about knowing how to use a weapon and fight, every one of them was required to be knowledgeable in at least two other areas, ranging from history to advanced physics. And with people now living at least a hundred and fifty years, and having their work age extended to very near its end, it meant that very few of security officers were younger than forty. Elias walked off with a short nod, Tomas then turned to Marcus

"Professor Hyeon and I will be coming inside with the security team, I want you to remain here and monitor the situation, on any sign that the ship is powering up or anything else that seems dangerous you are to seal of this facility, and call in the security forces to deal with the situation, contact Theo Nuros at Nephthys headquarters, he is familiar with the situation and has forces ready to deploy to this location."

Professor Hyeon looked at him with surprise, Tomas gathered that she thought he wouldn't include her because of her earlier remarks, but Tomas knew that she was the best chance they had of understanding anything inside of the ship, and that she would be the one to lead the efforts of uncovering this new technology, and he

would never put his own grievance before progress, though there weren't any in this case. Tomas appreciated her honesty.

"Of course director. But, could you tell us, if everything goes well when will the rest of team be allowed inside?" Marcus said, his eagerness was obvious, and some might even say that he had more right to go in first than Tomas, but Tomas was the head of the organization that found the ship and he felt entitled to do what he wanted once in a while, and he had no intention of keeping the ship only for himself, at least not in the long run.

"As soon as the security team inside verifies that everything is safe you and the rest of the team will have full access. You will work under Professor Hyeon's supervision and guidance, and she will later report to me, I won't involve myself overmuch on your territory, this is your show, just want to be here for the opening credits." Tomas said with a smile, he saw Professor Hyeon's eyes widen again as he said that she would have the run of the place.

"Very well sir, I will inform my staff immediately" Marcus said and then left back through the hallway they came through.

Tomas glanced at Professor Hyeon and noticed her suspicious glare

"So, would you like a job?"

She stared at him for a moment before answering

"I'm guessing that you wanted me to lead this project from the start, and the consulting part was just to get me hooked."

"I have wanted you as a part of Olympus for a long time." Tomas said. She thought about his words for a few moments before finally responding

"You know that I can't refuse this offer, not just because I want to work on this project. But because there isn't anyone else on the planet that I could trust it with."

"Just like there isn't anyone else on the planet I would trust it with, other than you." Tomas said seriously.

She looked hard into his eyes trying to see whether he was truthful or if he was just flattering her. Realizing that he was truthful her hard stare softened a bit before she responded.

"I love my job, I love teaching, I used to believe that there was nothing that would make me abandon the responsibility I fell toward those kids, and I see now that I was wrong."

Her dedication to her students was one of the reasons why Tomas wanted her in the first place; he had planned to play on that dedication in his new offer to her prior to the discovery.

"You don't need to abandon teaching forever, Olympus has plans to open new schools, you could teach there when you are free from the project, and if you accept my offer you will be given a very high

position in Olympus, one that will give you access to many things that haven't yet been released to the public, that I believe will convince you that you've made the right decision."

"What position would I be given?" She asked in a business like tone.

"Are you familiar with Olympus operational structure?"

"You use a five tier based system I believe."

"Yes, our personnel are divided into tiers, these tiers are universal across all divisions, basically meaning that all personnel of the same tier are the same rank, no matter what area they are employed in. There are separate rankings within a single tier so that in emergencies it would be known who is in charge. Our organizations is divided into five pyramid structures, at the bottom of each are staff members, then there are many department chiefs, above them are division chiefs, next are sector chiefs with each previous level being a part of the next, then come section heads. There are five sections, Research and development, Engineering, Application, Economics and Security. New employees are not given a tier 1 until they have been working with us for at least a four year period, sometimes more, there are of course exceptions to the rule when we hire someone more qualified, though that happens rarely and not without extensive background checks, tests and evaluations, heads of the departments are usually at least tier 2 employees, heads of divisions tier 4, and sectors chiefs tier 6 there are usually five sector chiefs per sector, each sharing in the leadership and responsibilities. Security is currently the only section that has a section head, with Elias being tier 7 and in charge. Other sections are being run by sector chiefs until such a time when a suitable person is appointed as a head, and that is my decision."

"Tier 7? I thought that there were only five, and how is Elias the same tier when you are his superior?"

"I mentioned that each tier has several levels within itself, I am tier 7 level 10, Elias is tier 7 level 9, which means that he has access to the same things I have. Tiers besides being a way to structure our employees are also a way to discern an employee's clearance level. There are many staff members with the tier 5 or 6, such as Elias's and my assistants, tier levels also indicate the level of trust a person is given. No one on this project is of a lower tier than 5. Tier 7 is reserved for those on top and there are currently only two persons with a tier 7 ranking."

"So what tier would I be given if I accept the job?" She asked.

"Elias is the head of security, he has many sector chiefs, beneath him that take care of day to day stuff, but he is in charge of it all, there are four other sectors that have no heads, I was hoping that you would accept the job of being the head of Research and development.

So you would be given the same, tier 7 level 9."

Hyeon looked at him with mouth agape for a few moments, visibly shocked before she responded

"You would have put me in the leadership position of Olympus? I haven't even worked for Olympus before?"

"I told you that sometimes people we hire are given a tier from the start, and that extensive background checks are done before any such decision is made, I have been looking for the potential heads for Olympus for decades, I was lucky when I found Elias, and then I found you, though you kept turning my offers down, but I was convinced that I would change your mind eventually, this project came at just the right moment for me to use it for this purpose, I knew that I only had to show you the kind of work we do here to change your mind." Tomas stopped for a moment, looked the startled Professor in the eye and said softly.

"Seo-yun, I know that you are the right person for the job, I have known for the past twenty years, you are brilliant, and have a mind that needs to push its boundaries, reach for new unimaginable things. You are very much like Elias and me, and that are the kind of people that I want working, no, not working, living for Olympus, because we are a family, and we always seek to better ourselves. Together we can accomplish anything we want, and if you accept you will learn about things you can't even conceive of yet." He finished, and waited for her response.

He knew by the look in her eyes that he had her with that speech, because deep down she was the same as him, she had the same need he had, to advance those around them, Tomas accomplished that by using Olympus as his proxy, she guided young minds in hope of widening their horizons.

"You know, you are not at all the person I believed you were." She said after a moment of thought. "You are driven, more than I am, and I can see why you accomplished all that you did. I'll accept the offer."

"Great, welcome aboard Professor." He said with a grin.

"You may call me Seo-yun, if we are going to work closely together we might as well drop the honorifics."

"Welcome then Seo-yun." Tomas offered his hand and she shook it.

"Though, I still believe that you have megalomaniac tendencies, but I would need to observe you for an extended period in order to be sure." She added with a smirk.

At her words his grin quickly turned to full blown laughter that echoed throughout the chamber, which prompted people around them to look in their direction. When Elias returned with the rest of security

team in full light assault armor Tomas was still laughing. Elias approached with his helmet beneath his left arm his N20 assault rifle slung over his right shoulder, he glanced at Tomas and then turned to Seo-yun.

“Did you break him?” He asked in a deadpan voice

“I believe that I must have, either that or my previous diagnosis was dead right, and this is his way of celebrating success.” Seo-yun answered in the same deadpan voice which only served to throw Tomas in another fit of laughter where he needed to reach out and grab the nearby wall for support or risk falling down.

Elias watched his boss for a few seconds before returning to his conversation with Seo-yun

“I’m guessing that means you accepted the job?”

“Yes, though now I wonder what exactly did I let myself be drawn into?”

“Don’t worry you will learn to ignore these kind of moments, welcome aboard by the way.” He said shaking her hand.

“Thanks, and you mean this kind of thing is a regular occurrence?”

“It has been known to happen from time to time.”

While they were chatting as if they were lifetime colleagues Tomas managed to get himself under control, he quickly righted himself straightened his clothing and turned his eyes to Elias and Seo-yun.

“I haven’t had such a good laugh in decades; it seems that your employment has already paid off.” Tomas looked around to the other employees in the hangar, all of which turned their heads away when they saw him looking their way, he knew that word would spread about his outburst, and that a new rumor about him would start circulating, Tomas didn’t care about them and let them go wild, usually the rumors died down on their own, if only his employees knew how close most of them were to the truth.

Chapter Four

"Is your team ready?" Tomas asked.

"Yes, this is Laura our computer expert, Greg who is studying dead languages, Mel our demolition expert, and Johan engineering expert." Elias said indicating each person in turn, all of them had their helmets on so their faces were hidden. They looked impressive and menacing in their dark blue-black light armor, combat suit which was covered in light alloy plates on critical areas, chest, thighs, back, shins and forearms. Helmet was a full faceplate, made of unbreakable tinted glass.

"Alright, how are we doing this?" Tomas asked.

"Laura and I will take point, Greg and Mel will be in the rear, with Johan, you and the Professor in the center. You don't touch anything until we secure the room we are in. Any sign of trouble Greg and Mel will escort you out while we cover your retreat." Elias said. He and Elias had spoken briefly about the operation before; the explanation was mostly for Seo-yun's benefit.

"Very well, let's go."

"Wait." Seo-yun said "We aren't going to put armor like them?" She asked.

Elias look at her "There is no point, light armor won't save you if you run into trouble when you don't know how to move in it, and you aren't trained in the use of heavy armor, we will cover you, and if we run into something that we can't deal with then we are all already dead. But there is no need for worry, if there was someone inside they would have already gotten out, at most we will need to deal with automated defenses but even that is unlikely, and armor is only a precaution." Elias finished and then put his helmet on.

Tomas saw that Seo-yun wasn't all that much reassured with Elias's words, he took her by the shoulders and turned her around to face him.

"It will be fine; Elias and his team know what they are doing." He tried to make his words as convincing as he could.

Seo-yun look him in the eyes, he could see something there but wasn't able to identify it before she shook herself and her usual confident self-reappeared, she nodded gravely and they turned and went down the stairs to the level of the ships entrance.

Elias and Laura entered first disappearing inside the ship, a few seconds' later lights inside turned on, eerie blue light shone on the two figures inside, Elias and Laura who had lowered to their knees and were scanning the interior with their scopes, The rest of the team moved quickly to the entrance and took positions a moment later Elias

turned his helms speakers on and yelled. “Clear!”

Tomas and Seo-yun moved carefully inside while the rest of the team moved further inside towards the doorway that lead further inside. Once they entered they could see that they were inside a kind of a hangar, the room was 15 meters wide from wall to wall and maybe 20 meters deep, with the ceiling being around 5 meter high. The room was mostly empty save for a few strange looking crates pilled on the right side.

Elias approached them his face hidden behind his faceplate. “The lights seem to be automated, they turned on when we entered a few meters inside. As we thought there doesn’t seem to be anyone home. We can stay here for a few minutes or continue inside.”

Seo-yun looked around and shook her head “I think we should continue, there doesn’t seem to be much here, and the next team can look through this room more closely later. Unless there is something you want to look at?” She said to Tomas.

“No, those crates might warrant a closer look but nothing that can’t wait.”

They continued making their way inside, as they entered the doorway from hangar to the next corridor the lights again turned on, with the same eerie blue washing over the metallic walls, the light intensity was low, like the light was covered with a blanket.

“The lighting might suggest that whoever used this ship had delicate eyesight.” Seo-yun said.

Tomas nodded, that had occurred to him as well. The corridor wasn’t long, a few meters at the most, with four doors on the left and right wall, two on one side and two on the other opposite each other. The doors were closed and didn’t open when they came close, there was a panel of some kind beside each door but apparently it wasn’t under power. The celling was around two and a half meters tall perhaps judging by the gap between the top of Elias’s head and the celling, since he was the tallest in their party at two meters and ten centimeters, the doors themselves were about two meters high, so that Elias needed to lower his head when he went through. They continued down the corridor to the next doorway, the hallway was at an angle upwards which then turned by 360° so that they rose above the hangar and the corridor they were previously in. The purpose of next chamber they entered was clear immediately it was the ships control center. The team quickly moved thought the room and cleared it. It was shaped as a half sphere, so that the center of the room was in fact the center of the sphere, the round walls had no devices or instruments on them, they were smooth and made of a different kind of material than the metallic walls in the corridors or the hangar, the room was around 7 meters across, in the center there were two small

chairs, with no handholds, and some kind of consoles, the chairs were turned towards the back of the ship, which seemed odd at first, before it dawned to Tomas that they probably didn't need to see the outside to pilot the ship, and if they did the vision of the outside was most likely generated on the consoles, there were two more consoles one to the left and one to the right of the center ones, with some kind of plate placed on the floor further inside the room behind the center consoles.

"Well this seems a bit—"

"Anticlimactic" Tomas finished for Seo-yun

"Yes…"

Tomas approached the middle console the one with two chairs, he looked down and saw a series of levers on the edges on the right and left side, with the middle being smooth and of a strange light silver color.

"The ship is obviously under power, yet these consoles show no sign of being active." Seo-yun said.

Laura approached with her helmet removed; she had close cropped black hair and was Caucasian with maybe just a bit of Asian ancestry thrown in. She peered down. "There doesn't seem to be an on switch, maybe the ship doesn't have enough power, or maybe it was damaged, we don't know why it was at the bottom of the ocean."

"Perhaps, though if it could remain under power for thousands of years I don't see why the consoles wouldn't be active unless someone turned them off. As for them being damaged, I think there would be more of a physical evidence to indicate that." Seo-yun said.

"Or we just don't know how to turn them on." Tomas added.

"Or that." Seo-yun agreed.

Tomas sighed, and looked around the room for a moment looking for anything that stands out. "Well, this is a bit of a disappointment, there is nothing here that seems extraordinary, seems a bit too familiar, it all looks like something human hands could build."

"Actually, this vessel has been built by Loraru as were most other vessels of the Union."

Tomas whipped his head around to the source of the voice, the rest of the team readied their rifles on the source of the voice, while Seo-yun jumped back a step. It spoke in English, and though it sounded human it was definitely not, it was too perfectly spoken, too monotonous, it was wrong. The source of the voice stood motionless on the floorplate further down in the room, its eyes were staring straight into his. It had four arms two on each side and two legs, it was shorter than an average human, around meter and half in height, though it was wider in the shoulders by at least half as much as an average human, it was dressed in yellowish clothing that hanged

loosely on its body, it had six eyes arranged in three row of two placed at an angle with the bottom pair being the closest together and the top pair the furthest from each other, making a V shape, two vertical slits bellow the eyes were most likely nostrils, and bellow that a single horizontal line the mouth, it didn't have any lips, its head had a vaguely triangular shape with the bottom being narrow and the top of the head wide, it didn't have hair on its body that Tomas could see, and the top of its head ended in six rigid spikes, curving upwards. Its skin was a sickly gray color. The top arms were crossed at its chest with the bottom ones positioned loosely at its side dropping to its knees.

"Tomas, Seo-yun, move back slowly." Elias said while moving slowly forward, his rifle aim at the being.

"There is no need for that I assure you, I mean you no harm, not that I could harm you even if I wanted. And I would appreciate it if you would lower your weapons, I do not know if they would damage anything if fired but I would rather not risk it." The being said.

"Elias, wait." Tomas said and slowly stepped forward and spoke to the being "Ah, my name is—"

"Tomas, yes I overheard the one in front of you, Elias, address you as such, I don't know the designations of the rest, as you never addressed them within the ship or its immediate surroundings."

"Well it's only appropriate that you introduce yourself as well then, what is your name." Tomas asked.

"A cultural convention? Very well, my designation is Autonomous Survey Unit Mark 77321, used in searcher class scout ships, tasked with aiding the crew in analyzing raw data."

For a moment no one said anything, then Seo-yun broke the silence "You are a machine?"

"That statement is correct even though it is wrong, I am an interface, thing you see before you is just a representation." It said in its monotone voice, Tomas noticed that it mistook Seo-yun's question for a statement, meaning that it didn't have a perfect understanding of their language.

Seo-yun moved around the console and stepped onto the plate reaching her hand through the being before anyone thought to stop her.

"A hologram, remarkable." She said still moving her hand through the being, or rather a hologram of the being.

"Seo-yun, please step back behind me." Elias said trying to aim his rifle at the hologram while not aiming at Seo-yun.

She looked back at him surprised, seeing how he and the rest of the team were trying to keep his aim true while she moved "Oh, you can lower your guns, this is just light, a hologram, he isn't really here,

see." She said while repeatedly moving her hand in and out of the hologram.

"Elias, she is right. Bullets won't do anything to it." Tomas said.

They stood in the same positions for a couple of seconds, and then they lowered their rifles and moved about the room taking other positions, standing at the ready. They communicated through their helmets inner comm line.

"Is there anyone else aboard this ship other than us?" Tomas asked.

"No."

"May I assume then that it was you who opened the ships door, and sent the signal that led to the recovery of this ship?" Tomas asked.

"Correct."

"Why did you wait for months before opening the door, if you could have done so at any time, or why didn't you contact us when we found the ship?" Elias asked suspiciously.

"Time was required for the workable translation of your language, which was impaired by the fact that you rarely spoke it in the vicinity of the vessel and further more by the internal damage to the ships many sensors, and contact before now was impossible for the same reason, the only thing I was able to do was redirect a signal I received."

"You are saying that the ship was damaged by landing." Laura said.

"Incorrect, landing inquired no damage to the ships systems. Damage I was referring to occurred due to lack of maintenance for approximately seven thousand cycles."

"Why didn't you then open the door earlier?" Seo-yun asked moving of the floor plate.

"My programing forbids me from executing any action that may cause harm to the ship or its crew, without explicit order from the crew, or a Union member of sufficient rank."

Tomas looked around the room at the rest of the team and saw them do the same. He cleared his throat and asked. "And what is the Union?"

Elias turned sharply towards Tomas while his body grew rigid, he tightened the grip on his rifle and turned back at the hologram when it started to speak.

"The Union, created sixteen thousand cycles ago, it is a union of fifty four races, led by six founding races and eighteen other member races."

They looked at each other again trying to comprehend this information, a few moments ago they learned that they weren't alone in the universe, and now they learned that not only were they not

alone, but there was an entire Union of races out there. Seo-yun turned back towards the hologram. “You said that your programing doesn’t allow you to act other than on orders by the crew or a Union official, yet you contacted our submarine, and you opened the door for us, why?”

“My scans of your physiology couldn’t be compared to the Union races database as that part of my core matrix has been corrupted, I concluded that there was a 0.05% chance that your race was a new member of the Union, and as 30% of my matrix has been corrupted, I accepted the probability that your race was new member of the Union acceptable, and more preferable than engaging the self-destruct protocol. Was I wrong?” It ended in the same monotone voice it used before.

“No, your choice was correct.” Tomas said, and got a sharp look from Seo-yun, she started to speak but Tomas cut her off with a hand gesture, he turned back to the hologram.

“We will need access to the ship, and its databases, and translated into our language if it’s possible.” He said.

“You can access ships databases from any of the consoles, the data is recorded in Union standard, I am not able to translate as I have no access to those databases, I have access only to data which is included in my matrix or provided to me by the crew for analysis. I can translate that portion of the data.” It said.

“That will be acceptable, but can you instruct my people on how to access the consoles and answer any of their questions, and can you open the doors to other areas of the ship?” Tomas asked.

“Yes.”

Tomas motioned for Seo-yun, to follow him out of the room, but he stopped at the entrance and spoke again “How far away from the ship can you monitor our conversations?”

“In your measures 10.7 meters.”

Tomas nodded. “Elias secure the ship.” He said and then left the room with Seo-yun following close behind, she caught up to him and tried to speak but Tomas stopped her by putting a finger across his lips. She caught on and followed, although he could see that she was aggravated. They exited the ship and found Marcus and another employee there waiting for them, Tomas saw that he was eager to learn what they found inside and was barely containing his curiosity.

“Marcus I need a room where the Professor and I can speak privately.”

“There is a conference room, Nora can show you where.” He said

“And I need you to gather all personnel and inform them that from now on no one is to speak anything near the ship, at least until a proper guidelines are established, also no one is to enter until

Professor Seo-yun briefs everyone.” Marcus looked crestfallen.

“Don’t worry, all of those here will get their chance to explore inside. As soon as I finish my conversation with the Professor, she will brief you and then you can start.” Hearing that Marcus cheered up a bit.

Nora guided them to the conference room, and left them there alone. As soon as the door closed Seo-yun turned to Tomas. “What the hell was that? Why did you lie to him?”

“I never lied.” Tomas replied.

“Never lied! You said we were part of this Union.”

“No, I said that its choice to let us in was correct, I never confirmed that we were a member of that Union.”

She looked at him with an open mouth. “Still you lied by omission, we will need his help if we are to unlock that ships secrets, what do you think he will do when he realizes we aren’t who he thinks we are?”

“Blow us up.”

“What?” She said surprised.

“We need to make it believe we are a member of the Union, otherwise it will self-destruct, it said so itself.”

“Oh.” She said, in a soft voice, she remembered what it had said.

“You need to make sure our people don’t say anything that will make it think differently. And you need to gather as much information about this Union as you can while figuring a way to isolate it from the ships systems. Its programing is obviously corrupted, and no wonder, it’s been here for thousands of years. You must also find out how it got here, and why.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You are in charge here Seo-yun, proceed in whatever manner you think is best.”

Chapter Five

February 2082

Seo-yun rode the elevator going down into the heart of Nephthys, she was on her way to the main office of Olympus, to deliver her report to Tomas in person. It surprised her that Tomas left so soon, she thought that he wanted to be in charge no matter what else he said. But the day after he officially hired her, and gave her a document detailing her job and responsibilities, he spoke with the rest of the team saying how he had great fate in them, wished them good luck and left. Elias spent another week at Sedna coordinating with the security team and establishing new protocols and then he too left, and she found herself completely in charge, it was strange at first how everyone followed her instructions without asking any questions, even though she was new at the job. She had spent every waking moment of the past two months working on the alien ship, inspecting its technology, reviewing the translated portions of its database (they had a team that was working on translating the Union languages), and speaking with its AI, it has been established that it was in fact an artificial intelligence, one severely restricted, but an intelligence nonetheless. It pained her to be away from the project but she felt that she had been putting this trip off for as long as she could, and she knew that Marcus was up to the task of managing things while she was gone. She had been sending status reports to Tomas every two weeks, but they included only the overview of the work, as for everything else he said that it could wait until she was available to present it in person. She was very much surprised to see the ways things worked in Olympus, at first everything seemed insane to her, but as time passed she found that things worked, and worked well.

The elevator finally stopped on the Olympus offices floor, the elevator was one of four, which were designated solely for Olympus use and no civilian could enter it without permission, just as only Olympus personnel were allowed on this floor. As soon as Seo-yun left the elevator a security officer greeted her and said that he would escort her to the Tomas's office. As she walked, her thoughts turned to other things that she wanted to talk about with Tomas. With her position also came unrestricted access to all Olympus databases, she didn't have time to look into those until a few days ago, and even then she hadn't even scratched the surface of all the projects Olympus had in motion, not to mention those that were finished, one of the reasons she finally decided to come here was so that she could talk with Tomas in person about the things she found. She couldn't believe how much bigger Olympus was than what she and the rest of the world

thought. Sure everyone knew that they were one of the strongest enterprises in the world, and everyone was wrong. Olympus wasn't one of the strongest enterprises, it was the strongest, no other company had anywhere near as much resources, nor personnel. And she was amazed at the amount of things Tomas managed to keep concealed, Olympus was an empire. She believed that not even the world state leaders realized how much they depended on Olympus. More than 60% of the market was controlled by Olympus, although the public believed that the number was closer to 30%, as was always reported, which was already alarming, but what they didn't know was that Olympus owned many smaller companies, companies that weren't absorbed into Olympus, but nevertheless owned. That accounted for another 30% of the market. Concordis employed Olympus security instead of police in many cities, just as they used them for many state functions and events. Most air travel in the world was done by Olympus transportation. Olympus manufactured more than 70% of all military assets for Concordis and 20% for the League. It had monopoly on Energy and food distribution in Concordis. Olympus medical equipment were used in almost every hospital in the world. Frankly Seo-yun was appalled that the world governments allowed it to happen, so she went back and reviewed all the records from the start of the company, and realized how it happened. After the war the world was in turmoil, economy broken, people starving, governments just didn't know what to do, the League and the Concordis were a short term solution. Until Olympus. She could see how the governments were relieved that someone took the problem off their hands, so they helped as much as they could, aiding Tomas Klein and his conquest without even realizing it, and as Olympus grew so did the standard of living. She could clearly see how the world governments let it happen without even realizing. Tomas was a very smart man, Olympus was always fair, prices were low enough to ensure growth of the company without being overpriced, and with their slow conquest of the markets it only became a matter of time before everything was controlled by Olympus. And even then Tomas showed his skill. He wasn't greedy, he was patient, he kept everything available to everyone ensuring that no one would try to hinder his progress until it was too late, and Seo-yun was sure that the world still didn't realize what he has done. The world was dependent on Olympus, without them the world economy would again collapse. Tomas Klein was the most powerful man in the world. For all intents and purposes he ruled the world. And his greatest achievement was hiding that fact from everyone.

She finally arrived at the office and the secretary motioned for her to go inside.

“He is expecting you.”

Seo-yun opened the door and stepped inside the office. It looked more like a command room than an office, both the right and the left wall were screens six meters wide and three tall, the one on her left showed hundreds of graphs, statistics and projections, while the one on the right showed multitude of data that was constantly changing, faster than she could follow. In the center of the room was a pair of comfortable couches with a low table between them, at the end of the room was a so called “control desk” a variety of windows were open on its glass surface or were floating just above it, holograms similar to the one found on the alien ship, though much less advanced. Tomas Klein sat at the table his hand furiously working above the table, bringing up new windows or dismissing them with a gesture, two comfortable chairs were placed in front of the desk. When Seo-yun approached the middle of the room he cleared the desk of all the windows and then with a tap turned the wall screens off, they now showed a beautiful recording of a sunny day on a grass plane. He met her eyes and held her glare.

“So you’ve finally found time to look through the files.” He said with a slight smile.

“Yes, and there is much I wish to discuss with you.” Seo-yun replied evenly. He stood up and walked up to the couch on Seo-yun’s right, he sat down and indicated that she sit on the other. She hesitated for a second before relenting and taking the seat across him. He watched her calmly, relaxed as if he didn’t have a care in the world. She studied him for a moment before finally speaking.

“How is it that no one knows how big Olympus really is?” She asked.

“Oh, there are people who know, but they, like everybody else simply don’t care.” He responded cheerfully.

“How can they not care? Olympus is a private company, a word from you can cripple the entire world economy.”

“It is human nature, as long as everything works, they don’t care, I have always dealt fairly with everyone, those in the government that know keep it hidden because it suits them, Olympus keeps the economy running, making their jobs easier, as for the rest, they ignore our expansion because dealing with us brings them money, and our removal would mean losing their wealth. As for those ignorant, they listen what the media tells them, and believe them, they have no desire to learn of things that don’t concern them, as long as they have a comfortable life, which Concordis provides.”

“That’s insane.” She said.

“Yes it is. And that is the way most everyone in the world operates, they follow the design set before them, they finish school,

they get a job, they marry, they have children and they die. They don't care about anything outside their own little world. I have created Olympus for people who wish to live different kind of life. A life that is a journey, a path, were they never stop, but always keep reaching for that goal at the end."

"So you believe that having a family is wrong?" She asked, that part irked her a bit, she always wanted a family of her own.

"No, you misunderstood me. I have nothing against family, what I despise is monotony, it's suffocating, it destroys good people, and it prevents progress. How many married people you know that have been together for years, who say they love each other, and yet they are miserable."

She knew a lot, many of her colleagues were married, and she could see that they have lost something, not because they were married but because of the thing Tomas mentioned, monotony, routine, that is the probably the biggest reason why people cheat, why they do things they wouldn't otherwise. Not that everyone was like that, just most of them.

"There are many people within Olympus that are married" Tomas continued "But every single person in Olympus is there because they are like me. They crave something more than the ordinary everyone else holds as the utmost achievement in life. They want to do things that no one else has done, to be part of something else, even if they themselves don't know what it is, they hear that call within themselves, and they had the courage to reach beyond the path that they have been put on. Do you understand?"

"Yes." She said, and she really did understand. It took this conversation to make her see that the past months while she was working at Olympus were the happiest days of her life, she had always felt the thing that Tomas described, but until now she just didn't realize it. She had been searching for something, she had jumped from school to school, getting degrees in many areas, always searching for something she herself didn't realize she needed. And now it seemed like she finally found it with Olympus. "I understand."

Tomas smiled. "I know that you do. That's why I hired you in the first place."

"We've gone off topic. Why did you really start Olympus? You have accumulated power and yet you don't do anything with it. All you do is work and expand, and I have access now, I know how much you work every day, you don't indulge yourself in the slightest, anyone else with your kind of wealth would be spending it as fast as he could earn it. So tell me the real reason for creating Olympus, you have invested in every kind of research man could think of."

Tomas looked at the wall to the green field and blue sky projected

there, he seemed to be studying it closely. She waited patiently until he suddenly turned his eyes and locked them with hers.

“My first memory is of the clear night sky, I was in the wilderness with my parents, this was just before they died, I don’t remember why or where, but I do remember the stars, they are my first and clearest childhood memory. Ever since that moment I have been enamored with them, I have always wanted to reach them, to grasp them in my hand. You asked me why I built Olympus. I built it to fulfill my childhood dream, to go among the stars. Over time, as I grew that dream evolved from my reaching the stars to me taking the humanity with me. Everything I have ever done, was for that purpose, the ship we found has just accelerated my plans, but Olympus is my gateway to the stars.”

Seo-yun was struck by the intensity of his words, coming from anyone else it would seem as a childish dream, a thing you might say if someone asked what your dream was. But coming from Tomas it had an entirely different feel. This was the man who built a worldwide empire, who could have ruled the world if he so wished, a man who had devoted his whole being to the purpose of fulfilling his dream.

“And what happens when you fulfill your dream, when you reach the stars?” She asked

Tomas smiled yet again, but this time his smile seemed lighter, warm. “You, Seo-yun, better than anyone should know the size of the universe, the number of stars in the sky. My dream is one that can never be fulfilled, a goal that can never be reached, and that is precisely why it is a dream worth reaching for.”

Hearing his words, for the first time in a long time Seo-yun felt like her life was on a path that was right for her. She looked at Tomas, in his green eyes she saw a glint of something, a drive unlike anything she had ever seen. She looked at his face, his words were that of a madman, and perhaps he was a bit mad. He had to be, to do what he had done all for a childhood dream. There were easier ways to reach the stars, he could have become an astronaut, but instead, he conquered the world, and chose to bring all of humanity with him on the journey towards his dream.

Chapter Six

"So, what are your plans?" She asked.

"I have many plans, few that are already in motion, others that will be in the close future and even more that are still a long way from now. But you don't need to worry about them, you will be included in every major move I make. For now, I need you to oversee your current project and make sure that we get as much as we can from it, in as short a period of time as possible. Tell me what have you learned?"

Seo-yun took a deep breath and let it out slowly "We have learned a lot, but let me start with the technology."

Tomas nodded for her to proceed. She reached into her coat inner pocket and took out her personal datapad, she swiped a few times across its surface and brought the list she prepared before the meeting,

"Well, we run tests on the ship, and some of the technology is familiar to us, more advance for sure but not all that much, and some is so far ahead of us that we can't figure out what the hell it does or how. The ship is a mystery. It's like someone took all kind of different technologies from multiple sources and just put them all together in one small ship. From the ships databases we know that it is a small scout ship, which was carried around by a bigger class ship, we have not yet figured out their classifications but the ship that carried this one was listed as a long range explorer ship, the ship we recovered has only one weapon type, a pair of laser emitters on the top of the ship, they can be retracted into the hull, which was where they were when we found the ship. The lasers aren't all that more advanced than ours other that they have a lot more power. Next, the ships power source, it seems to be a type of antimatter reactor, one so advanced that we have no idea how they managed it, from what little we gathered it works on the principle of matter-antimatter collision, where the reactor produces antimatter and matter collisions on demand and then contains the energy released, and converts it in the energy the ship can use. It seems that they used this power source for most everything from powering their stations to cities and ships, which indicates that it was relatively safe and that they have a greater understanding of this technology. The reactor is made so that it would last forever and from what we could see, it runs perfectly and needs no maintenance whatsoever."

"There is no chance of it blowing us up if mess with it?" Tomas asked.

"Not that we can tell, we only understand the basics of how it works, there is a chance of course, that we could cause a reactor

meltdown, but it is negligible and we are taking all the precautions we can think of."

Tomas nodded and motioned for her to continue.

"The ships drives are so far an enigma, the databases have several types of drive systems listed but since that part of the data is badly corrupted we have no idea which system is installed on the ship, and we can't make head or tails of it, and we don't want to risk turning them on since we can't even figure out if they are still operational. Next is the ship's hull, it is made from a light weight composite, that is reasonably strong, but we have no idea what it is. It's not as strong as some of our strongest metal alloys, but the weight to strength ratio is much better. And when I say strength I mean the balance between strength, hardness and toughness. We could have opened the door with the explosives if you hadn't instructed us not to use any excessive force. Then there are the ships sensors and communication relays, they have been severely damaged, and have deteriorated over time from the lack of maintenance, just as most other computer based systems have. The relays themselves seem to be mostly operational it's just that programs that guide them are failing. Basically most of the ships computer systems programs are corrupted, to one degree or another. The databases and the AI seem to have gotten away lightly compared to the other systems, judging from this we discern that they have been made better than the other systems. And the last thing we found is a small fabricator, which is where I chose to focus most of our efforts."

"A fabricator? What is that?" Tomas interrupted.

"Well, the closest thing we have are 3D printers, though this is more advanced, you basically feed the fabricator raw ingredients, then program what you want, and it constructs it. You can build things from simple metal plates to computers or clothes in a shorter period of time than it would take to be build it conventionally. We believe that it works by utilizing nano technology, meaning that basically billions of nano robots take the material provided and build things that the user programs into the computer. I have taken liberty of assigning a few members from Olympus nanotechnology department to the project."

"I wondered why you requested them." He said.

"Why didn't you ask?" She asked.

"I told you that you were in charge, I didn't want to appear as if I was looking over your shoulder." He responded with a smile.

"Even though you did. Look I mean." She said. A soft smile playing at her lips.

"From time to time." He said.

"Of course." She said, it didn't bother her at all. She was new at

the job and was in charge of a critical project, she would have been surprised if he didn't keep an eye on her. She scrolled down her datapad and then continued with her report.

"Now on to the data, we have learned their common, or as they referred to it trade language with the help of the ships Ai. The Union consisted from multiple races but most any data was recorded in the trade language, there are some small parts that are in other languages but those are manly untranslated versions of manuals, there are copies in the trade language for most every one of them. We managed to convert their time units to ours, one cycle is roughly two off our years. The Ai mentioned that the Union was created some sixteen thousand cycles ago, so that puts its creation at approximately thirty two thousand years ago. Now, bear in mind that before then most of the member races were already in space for thousands of years, the oldest and one of the founding members was a race called Unuura, they have been in space for five thousand years before the founding of the Union and their history goes a lot further back, before they even left their home world."

"That is a bit unreal, I mean that is a big chunk of time and it seems impressive, but from what you tell me about their technology it doesn't seem impressive at all, we have barely left our world, and already we can either understand their technology or already have something similar." Tomas said frowning.

"Yes, it seems that is the case with every Union race, and I believe I have the answer as to why that is." She said

"Why?" Tomas asked confused.

"Let me start at the beginning. After we converted their time units to ours and noticed that for all the time they spent in space their technology was not as advanced as we expected, we started looking at the history of the Union and then history of the individual races. Almost immediately we noticed that all the races had a rather large periods of time in between technological discoveries. There would be a new discovery followed by technological advancement and then a period of hundreds to thousands of years were nothing new was introduced, they would of course improve the designs of the existing technology, but nothing new was produced. Then something would happen, a cultural trigger of some kind, and they would advance again, and so on. The only period were there seemed to be a faster pace of advancement was when they reached space and met with other races."

"Have you figured out why that is?" Tomas asked.

"We aren't sure, but we have a theory, it was actually Laura our chief of security who noticed it first." She paused for a moment, trying to find the best way to present their theory, but she must have paused

for too long because Tomas got impatient and interrupted her “What?” he said impatiently.

Seo-yun sighed and said simply “War.”

“War?” Tomas asked confused “What does war have to do with anything.”

She eyed him for a short second and then said “Think about it. Humanity has waged wars since its birth, whether against nature or against one another. There is almost no period since we started recording history in which we haven’t fought a war in one way or another, even now after the most destructive war we ever had, we still squabble among ourselves. Every one of our technological advances had come from preparing for war, or immediately after, when we needed to get an edge for the next one. Of course there have been advances that haven’t been motivated by the military, but even those are in a way conceived for war. War against our competitors, to get an edge on a market, to earn wealth or take over your opponents business.”

“And it isn’t so in this Union.” He asked.

“Not at all. First you need to understand where and how these races evolved. Most every one of the Union races evolved to be either on the top of the food chain, or outside of it, they evolved with no competition, and as soon as they reached a point where they explored all of their world, they formed a community, they were unified from the start, there was never anything like what Earth has, with multiple governments, the only time they had something like that was when they were isolated by land and unable to communicate. Not that they didn’t fight amongst themselves they did, but it rarely came to bloodshed and when it did it was quickly resolved, they had small infightings, nothing on our all-out world war scale. So they felt no need to change for extended periods of time, they were safe from the environment, nature and other life on their worlds. When they did change it was to make their lives better. Their medical technology is leagues ahead of ours from what we had read in the databases, since the ship had no medical capabilities. When they went in space it was because their populations had finally exceeded their world’s limits. One other reason for the time it took them to reach this point is that they mostly reproduced a lot slower than us. There were a few races that reproduced as fast or faster than we do, and those were generally younger races, so there is something there as well. When they met other races there were wars between them, but rarely, and those were again periods where their technology seemed to leap ahead again. But again wars were quickly resolved since trade was much more profitable for both sides. There was one warlike race in the vicinity of one of the founding members of the Union territory, they started to

conquer planets from other races, and it was this event that pushed the other races to form the Union. The race that attacked was called Minoolos by the Union, though their real name was unpronounceable by most other races so they made their own name, it means “those who destroy”, and the race was actually a lot younger than most of Union races, it had already been warring in space for hundreds of years before coming upon the Union territory. They were only slightly more advanced than the Union races and were attacking multiple races at the same time. Until the Unuura called for an alliance that later became the Union. The attacked races shared technology, and researched new technologies in order to defend themselves, and they had a lot more manpower between themselves than the Minoolos had. And as soon as they closed the technology gap they pushed them back and reclaimed their worlds. They formed the Union and started expanding their territory, they even accepted the Minoolos into the Union later. In time the Union became an enormous behemoth with spherical territory of more than 700 light years in radius, with many thin finger like extensions from the center, and as such were not a soft target for warlike races. And with that safety in numbers there again came a period of little technological advancement. They didn’t have competition, they traded between themselves and outside races. There were new technologies introduced from time to time by trading or inclusion of other races into the Union, but nothing really age changing. And then we come to the reason why this scout ship was here.”

“Why?” He asked.

“The Union was attacked.” She responded.

“Why is that relevant to them coming here?”

“They were looking for habitable planets far away from their territory to settle.” She said.

“They were losing?” Tomas asked.

She nodded “Yes, and badly. They were attacked by an unknown force, at the beginning they didn’t even know what was happening, they were losing contact with planets, and every ship they sent to investigate failed to return. So they assembled a fleet and sent it to investigate. What returned was only one badly damaged ship. It reported that they were attacked by an unknown enemy, with superior technology. And from the little records we found in the databases they were far more advanced than the Union, more on the lines with what we expected to find with this ship. The Union tried diplomacy but the attackers didn’t even bother to respond, they just kept taking planets, killing their populations and settling their own. The Union tried to close the gap technologically but they were too far behind, only thing they could do was slow them down in hope that someday they might

match them. By the time the Union finally realized that they had no chance they were fighting for 400 years, and have lost more than 60% of their territory. So they decided to save as many people as they could, they sent survey ships in the opposite direction than the invaders in hope of finding an unpopulated part of the galaxy where they could start again. The ship that carried the one we found on Earth was such a ship, they were here about thirteen thousand years ago, and have been traveling for around a hundred years, the race that was in charge of the ship was one of the longer lived races of the Union they could reach five thousand years of age."

"They traveled for a hundred years? How fast were they going?" Tomas asked.

"Very fast, we aren't really sure how they did it but there are mentions of them using something they called translanes to travel between stars. We have no idea what those are whether it is something artificial or natural, we weren't able to figure out the math at all, and there is no mention of anything that they have found on the ship concerning that, we know they used this translanes from their historical data. And we managed to pull a few star charts from the data, the Union territory was directly on the other side of the galactic core from us, in the Perseus galactic arm, and the Union believed that the invaders came from the outer side of the Scutum-Centaurus arm." She said.

Tomas let out a long breath, she knew that he was holding it in for better part of her report, but also knew that his worries were ungrounded, if the Union hadn't come back to Earth in the last thirteen thousand years, they most likely won't be back at all.

He leaned back on and said. "Anything else in the database regarding the reason why they left a ship here."

"No, the database apart from being corrupted doesn't seem to have much information regarding the Union state at the time. I believe that we have accessed the files that the crew of the scout ship had with them or have specifically transferred, since there seem to be many gaps. The war with the invaders being one such, only historical data is available and it's lacking at least a hundred years of the war. There is no reason specified for leaving the ship here, the AI also doesn't have any information on that, but most of his databases were corrupted. They most likely planned to come back and were unable. Either they met their end somewhere on their journey, or have returned to the Union. Judging from the way the war was going before they started on their journey, if they had went straight home from Earth, they would have arrived just before the Union's defeat."

"You assume that the Union couldn't have survived." He said.

"We have done extensive projections based on the historical data

we had available. There was no chance of Union survival. They might have delayed the end by a couple hundred years but there was nothing else they could have done, they were too badly outmatched."

"Do you believe that whoever attacked them could come here?"

"The chance of that happening are slim to none, even the arrival of the Union ship on Earth was a very unlikely event, and this is even more unlikely. The galaxy is vast, there were many more possible venues of expansion much closer to their side of the galaxy. The only reason the Union came here was because they wanted to go somewhere they wouldn't be found. So no, there is almost no chance of that happening."

"And yet, we now know that there are many races out there, there is a chance that one of them might find us sooner rather than later." He said.

"Yes there is a chance of that. But in the addition of regular Union star charts we recovered some survey data from this region of space that the ship took before coming to Earth. It seems that our part of space is sparsely populated, and according to the survey our closest neighbors are at least 100 light years away, and at the time of their survey they haven't developed any technology, they had barley started using tools."

"Well that makes me feel a bit better, but they still had thirteen thousand years to advance."

"And so did we." She said with a smile.

"Anything else I need to know?"

"Nothing else, we still haven't translated the parts of the data that are in other languages, nor have we finished reading the translated parts yet, and there are still a few items on the ship we couldn't identify."

"Alright then, I guess that we are done here. You can return to your project and I have a lot of adjustments to make to my plans." Tomas said rising from his seat.

"Alright, I'll send you the written copy of the report." She said taping her datapad a few times.

"Thank you Seo-yun. It looks like the things are about to get very interesting."

Part Two – The Expansion

Chapter Seven

August 2093 – Eleven years later

Elias Bakas, head of security for Olympus ran down the streets of some backwater village in southern Venezuela at full sprint trying to keep himself from getting shot. The hostile forces weren't supposed to be there and yet they were shooting at him. His team was running ahead of him, all three of them that were still in the game, the rest of his nine men team have been taken out in the ambush. Elias slid down the ground and into a house through a hole in the wall. The house was poorly built and didn't provide much cover other than from sight. The enemy bullets ripped through the walls of the small village house all around him, some bouncing off the ground or inner walls and striking his armor. He wore a new generation of powered nano battlesuits developed by Olympus, the suit itself weighed about 60 kg and was made from new type of nano carbon fibers, courtesy of the research derived from the alien craft they found eleven years ago. The suit itself was powered by three of the new type of batteries developed by Olympus, they were earth technology inspired by alien concepts, and could store enormous amounts of energy for their size, they were small and could fit just beneath the armor without making it seem bulky like some previous attempts at a powered suit. And the adaptive energized nano technology made it much stronger than the previous incarnations as well. It could run mostly unpowered on its user's strength alone without losing any protection. The battlesuit was capable of repairing itself, though that capability draws heavily on its power reserves, or boosting the user's strength or speed, but one of the most important breakthroughs was the ability to control all suit systems by implants. The wearer of the suit could turn on and off the suits systems with a mental command, conserving energy ensuring that the suit doesn't run out of energy in tight situations. Elias turned his attention to the HUD in his helmet, it displayed various information concerning the suit. The information he needed to address now was displayed in the right top corner. Representation of the suit was showing there, with its lower back flashing red, indicating that he had taken a bullet there. He had barely felt the impact, the suits armor was good for a couple of shots in the same place, but the hit had actually damaged one of the power lines of the suit, meaning that the power to any systems below his hips was cut off, meaning his speed was severely reduced as he would need to move using just his own power. He jumped through the door deeper into the house were his team was. As he passed inside two members of his team positioned themselves at the door and covered the hole they came in. One

covered the window at the back of the house. Elias came to his feet in the middle of the room, he checked his power reserves and calculated time and amount of energy the suit would spend to repair damage to the power line. The damage wasn't big, just critical, and it would take at least 2 minutes for the nanites in his suit to repair it, but would also push his energy reserves down to 30%. He activated the self-repair program, and approached the window. The fire from outside had stopped.

"Anything?" He asked over his team's channel. They were all connected via a secure link, provided by their implants.

"Nothing, I don't believe they have any heavy weapons, so they'll most likely surround the building and wait us out." Laura his second responded. Elias crouched in a corner letting his suit repair itself without his movement interrupting it. It could move and repair at the same time, but each time he made a move that interfered with the repair process, time on the countdown clock rose a few seconds. He didn't bother to inform his team why he did so, they all had access to his suits systems and could read its telemetry. The two other members of his team Niko and John kept their backs turned to him and Laura.

"Any ideas?" he asked.

"We could try to run to the evac point." John said.

"No way. They have us surrounded by now, as soon as one of us steps outside of this building we are history." Niko responded.

"You do realize that it doesn't really matter whether we survive this or not right?" John asked calmly.

"Shut it boy." Laura answered instead of Niko sharply.

"Oh, c'mon it's not like we—" John started but Elias interrupted him

"Stop. It does matter, we will get out of this." Elias coldly. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes sir." John said softly.

"Alright, now, I want options." Elias said.

"Well, first they don't seem to have the same suits as us. The intel said to expect it, yet they clearly can't see us inside, since we would have been already dead." Niko said.

Elias nodded he had suspected the same, both from the way they managed to ambush them like that and the reason Niko mentioned. Their suits were equipped with infrared vision and could have easily seen through these thin walls.

"Yes and they had trouble keeping up with us at full speed." John said.

"So we know that they don't have heavy weapons, since we aren't buried in rubble, they are most likely short on ammo since they aren't wasting any on a lucky shot through the walls, they managed to sneak

up on us and ambush us." Elias said, he thought back on the ambush and something struck him as odd. "Anybody had a visual on the enemy?" he asked.

"No" Laura said.

"No, but then I was too busy running away to notice." John said.

"No, I tried to spot them but there was nothing, my suits sensors didn't even detect any movement prior to the ambush. I do have the number of shooters though, I had my implant analyze the sound record of the ambush, and there were nine different sources of fire." Niko said.

Elias noted in his implant Nikos quick thinking. "Nine man team, with light weapons. And most likely some kind of stealth system."

"It has to be something new, I didn't hear anything from research department." Laura said.

"Probably. Alright this is what I want you to do. Niko can you program your implant to analyze the sound in real time and feed the locations of the sound origins to your HUD?" Elias asked.

Niko paused for a moment. "Yeah, I can do it, I'll need to specify the frequency range for their gunfire, but I have the recording from the ambush so it's not a problem, but I'll need a few minutes to configure the suits HUD."

"Good, I want you to send us the program when you are finished. John, how much juice you got left?"

"About 60%" John answered.

"I want you to go on a full burn, you are going to be our bait." Full burn would deplete the suits power reserves rapidly but would also provide a big boost to wearers speed and strength.

"Oh joy, I get to be chased by bullets." John responded sarcastically.

"Laura, Niko and I will remain here and shoot through the walls at them when they fire at John, set your firing mode to piercing rounds. John I want you to run full speed in a straight line, they are slower than us and our suits can take a few hits from their weapons." Elias said.

"Great." John said and then muttered a few curses that were barely audible across the line.

"Niko how much more?"

"I'm just about…. And done." He said in a voice that clearly conveyed the grin he had beneath the helmet. Elias immediately noticed a notification on his HUD indicating a pending data download, he allowed it through his firewall, and executed the program Niko sent him.

"When they fire a red flashing dot will appear in your vision over the HUD designating where the source of fire is." Niko explained. "It

will remain at the same position for 2 seconds after the firing stops, and will move if the source of the fire is moving, you are going to need to adjust for the distance between the barrel and the weapons holder on your own, I didn't have time to program that as well."

"Good enough." Elias said.

His HUD flashed and informed him that the suit finished repairing itself, he got up from the corner and crossed to the center of the room taking position facing the wall. Niko and Laura took similar positions, while John remained by the door.

"Ready?" Elias asked.

"Yes." John answered.

"Go."

John moved through the room leaving dents in the floor, it took him three steps to cross the room and then he exploded through the window, almost immediately the enemy opened fire. Elias's HUD showed four red flashing dots indicating enemy positions. Elias adjusted his aim and fired four times at each dot, he could hear Laura and Niko doing the same. A moment later firing from the outside stopped.

"I got four. You?" Elias asked,

"Two." Niko said,

"Three." Laura said.

"We need to check and see if we got them or they just changed positions."

"John you alright?" Laura asked.

"Yeah, I got hit in the shoulder once but the suit held."

"Alright turn back and confirm that the targets are down, I'm sending you the coordinates." Laura said.

"Niko go help him, we will cover you."

Niko went out through the window, followed by Elias and Laura.

"I got five confirmed here." John said.

A minute later Niko called in. "Two here. I'm moving to the last coordinates."

"John get on the roof across the street I don't want us ambushed again."

"Yes sir."

"I'm at the last coordinates, there is blood but no body, I'll follow – shit!" Niko said followed by a short exchange of fire.

"Niko report!" Laura said.

"I'm okay, he just appeared in front of me, got him before he managed the get in position, he was wounded. I think his suit got damaged, I don't think he planned on showing up in front of me, they definitely have some kind of cloaking suits."

"Found the last one, dead." John said.

“Alright, if there are more we won’t see them until they fire. We’ll move towards the evac point, John keep to the roofs, Niko get back here.” Elias said.

They covered ground quickly using suits power, they arrived and secured the evac point. Elias called in the evac team. Ten minutes later a transport came across the horizon and they boarded it. As they lifted off, the village and its surroundings started exploding into bright blue particles until they swallowed everything, including the transport.

Chapter Eight

Elias opened his eyes, and the top of the chamber he was in slid open. He swung his legs over the edge and sat up. The face that greeted him was that of Maria Nunez. They have met years ago when she worked on a project involving the alien ship. Now she was head of Olympus simulation program.

She smiled softly at him “You win again. What is it, Fifteen to six for you I believe?” she said.

“Sixteen.” Elias said.

“Yes that’s right I forgot the one with the assassination.” She said cheerfully. “That one was inspired.”

“It was. So they programed a stealth suit on their own?” Elias asked.

His eight team members were in the process of “awakening” all around the room. Maria motioned him outside of the room and towards her office.

“They got the specs from the research department, so they just programed the scenario, the suits capabilities were real.” She said.

Elias nodded, he and the security department have been competing with the programing team since the virtual technology became viable as a training tool. A fierce rivalry had developed between them. The programmers managed to score a few wins against his team, but mostly by programming impossible scenarios, and since a certain scuffle between one of them and one of his men they have been trying to win in a more balanced match, hence the use of stealth suits. The programmers tended to use more guile and creative tactics rather than brute force, and their score was much better against other teams. Which only made them much more motivated to win against Elias and his team with the same tactics.

“They, used very little in terms of firepower. And only one team.” Elias commented.

Maria nodded “Yes, they thought that their win would be much greater if they won with less rather than more. They’ll up their game next time.”

“They almost won this time. If our suits weren’t as armored as they were, we would have all fallen in the ambush.”

“So did you notice any bugs?” She asked.

“None, like the past three times it was perfect, it felt real. The integration with our implants was perfect. I believe you finally made a perfect virtual reality.” Elias answered.

“I hope so, but these sort of things need to be carefully examined each time.” She said.

“Could you forward Niko’s sound detecting program to the development? I want them to incorporate it into the default suit design.”

“Of course Elias. Are you staying for a while? I know that the programmers will want a rematch soon.” She said with a smile.

“I’ll have to disappoint them for now, Tomas needs me on the Cloud station.” He said.

“Space? I must say the weightlessness managed to became a pain really fast, I have no idea how those who live there deal with it.” She shuddered.

“Tomas tells me that they will be putting in the artificial gravity fields, they should bring the generator online in a few days for testing.” They had managed to build a gravity field generator two years ago, and they had them in use, just not on the station yet.

“Something from a certain project?”

“Of course.”

“It amazes me sometimes how much we managed to advance in such a short time.”

“And still we have a long way to go.”

“I’ll arrange a transport for you to the spaceport. It will be waiting for you at the landing pad.” Maria said.

“Thanks. Tell the programmer team that I’ll be expecting a new challenge when I return.” He said as he walked out of Maria’s office.

“I will.” They shook hands and he left. The programing team was comprised of ten game level designers that Maria managed to steal from the entertainment branches of Olympus. They had the necessary experience to utilize this technology and build realistic challenges. Though they did go overboard a few times in the beginning, introducing a lot of impossible obstacles. They even put in an enormous Troll, ported from one of the games they designed, the Troll’s appearance came as a complete surprise to Elias and his team, it scared most of them as it exploded out of ground, and then it proceeded to clobber them to death. They have since then calmed down and focused on recreating tough but realistic situations, though they did tend to find new and inventive ways to use existing technology. There were other teams that competed against each other in simulations, security teams, but the programmers were the ones that created the environments, and so they created their own team.

Laura was already waiting for him in front of the facility. She would accompany him to the station, while the rest of the team remains here to train in various scenarios for another two months before rotating with the teams that were currently in the field. She fell in step with him as he passed.

“John didn’t take the exercise seriously.” Laura said evenly.

“He was never in the field before, and he is young, he will learn to take matters seriously after he gets some more experience.” Elias’s team frequently rotated two promising rookies through their ranks every few months so that they could get a feel for them and their responses.

“If he returns.” Laura said.

Elias didn’t say anything, there was nothing to say, Olympus personnel were as capable as those in the armies, their technology was better, and their people were on the average older. John would off course be put in low risk operations in the beginning, but even in those there were sometimes casualties.

They entered the elevator that would bring them from the heart of Nephthys to the surface.

“Niko was good.” Elias said.

“Yes, he has potential, and he is smart, I was thinking of putting him through tech and then command courses, in a decade or two he might be a great commander.”

“I was going to suggest the same, make it happen.”

When they arrived at the pad, the transport ship was already waiting for them as Maria had promised. They boarded the transport, and it immediately took off towards the space port located in the Pannonian basin. The trip from Nephthys would take just over an hour and forty minutes. They sat in a comfortable silence, both of them had many reports or requests to review during the flight. Elias opened his implants inbox and started reading through the list of requests Laura had forwarded to him. Anything she couldn’t deal with or was unsure how to handle she sent to him. He opened the first file and text started floating in his field of vision, he could have activated the audio form, meaning that he would hear a voice reading the text directly into his mind, but he more often than not chose to read. The implant was capable of massive data storage, and later recovery. It was mostly used to store most any kind of data, from pictures to text and videos, and it could send and receive files. There were some concerns at the start, of implant hackings, and a few minor incidents, but all those problems were solved by the introduction of a buffer system. The implants were in closed modes, until the user turns on the receive and send mode, and the mode wont activate until the sent items were activated and checked in an isolated system. Not to mention the high grade firewall system that Olympus has implemented, borrowing some ideas from the alien tech.

By the time he finished the request list, they were already at the space port. The space port was built nine years ago, when Tomas first started pushing for space exploration, he managed to convince the two major super powers to allow him to build a private space station, and

from there to coordinate his planed excavation of the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. The other nations, most notably Russia and U.S. where against a privately owned station in the Earth's orbit, but the two opinions that mattered where Concordis and the League. With permission from them, he started construction of the space port, and later of the station. He managed to even convince them to give him permission to build structures on the Moon, under the guise of factories and storage for the planed mining operation from the asteroid belt. Though Elias knew that was just the beginning of Tomas's plans. The U.S. again protested loudly, citing breach of the Outer Space Treaty, while the League and Concordis responded by saying that most countries that signed the treaty no longer existed. And so Olympus went ahead with Tomas's plans, while the former world powers watched from the sidelines unable to do anything to stop him.

As Elias and Laura left the transport, they were met with two security officers, greeted them with a salute of right fist to the chest which Elias and Laura returned. The salute was Tomas's idea, he believed that Olympus security should start to look more like a military as his plans went forward, and knowing his plans for the future, he agreed. The rest of the world, wasn't bothered by their salutes, they have grown accustomed to seeing Olympus security everywhere, and the militaries of the world frowned, but believed them just a bunch of mercenaries playing soldiers.

"Sir, the shuttle is ready." One of the officers said. Olympus security didn't have a strict rank system yet, like the military though, there were plans to implement some in the future, so they relied on Olympus tier system for now.

"Good." Elias said, and followed the officers to the shuttle.

The Olympus shuttles were nothing like the shuttles from the past, they weren't 2/3 rockets and 1/3 the actual shuttle. These were built by using a combination of earth and alien technology. They were capable of flying inside the atmosphere, leaving the Earth's atmosphere and traveling through space. They were used to transfer both people and cargo from Earth to Space. The Hermes class shuttle was never going to win any beauty contests but it did get the job done.

They approached the blocky shuttle, the flight crew was already priming the engines, when they boarded one of the pilots instructed them to fasten themselves, and then disappeared into the flight cabin. Soon after they could feel the shuttle lifting of the ground.

The experience of leaving the Earth's atmosphere was rather uneventful, the shuttle itself was completely sealed. There were no windows, though there were view screens that could show the video

from one of the outside cameras, but Elias didn't bother to turn them on, he found the whole experience a bit disconcerting.

A few minutes later they could feel the effects of Earth's gravity disappear signaling that they have entered space.

A screen directly across from them turned on, most likely by Laura with her implant. All that could be seen was the dark void filled with bright stars, much brighter than how they are seen from Earth, the shuttles cameras were much more advanced than the ones used long ago, He remembered when Seo-yun explained to him years ago how the images that were taken back when mankind first left Earth were of a much lower quality, and when taking a picture or a video the lens focused on the things that were brighter than the stars like the moon, a space station or astronauts, so stars weren't captured because they were much dimmer, giving the impression that you can't see the stars in space. The technology then wasn't enough to capture the same things that the human eye could. Now those cameras outside could capture the same things human eye could see and much more.

The stars slowly moved as the shuttle turned, the Earth appeared on the left side of the screen, and a few moments later the Cloud stations form could be discerned in the distance. As they drew closer the station grew bigger, until it almost filled the screen. The station itself had a unique look, Tomas rejected the designs that relied on wheels and spin to generate gravity as he planned on incorporating the artificial gravity generators as soon as the technology became available. The station resembled a five pointed star when watched from the above or below, kind of. The center was the main habitat, it was cylindrical in shape with both the top and the bottom housing numerous sensor equipment and relays, from the cylinders center extended the five star "points". The points were more like five skinny arms, at least for now. They would in time be decorated with multiples of other boxes and pods, as the station grew, one of the arms that was the designed as the station's food production facility, where the food for the station's inhabitants was grown, had already finished construction, and had slowly started production, each star point was about 400 meters long, and was planned to be around 200 wide. The rest of the points were mostly just building blocks. The other fully finished part was the center, the heart of the station. It was 700 meters high and had a diameter of 500 meters. It was a feat of engineering that was never before attempted. It was silver in color, it had no windows on the outside, but Elias knew that there were many cameras on its surface that would allow those living inside to see outside. The main part was imagined as a business and recreation area, but for now a only a few floors or decks are used for those purposes, and the rest was used as temporary housing for those that

lived on the station, until one of the fingers intended for habitats could be finished. The shuttle made way towards the lower part of the cylinder, that housed docking stations, and couple minutes later they safely landed inside the stations hangar, the door closed and air was pumped back into the hangar. The hangar wasn't large, it was just big enough to house three Hermes class shuttles, and Tomas planned to have a docking ring installed around the cylinder in time to accommodate the bigger ships he planned to build. As they landed Elias could feel the effects of gravity which meant that Tomas had already installed the gravity generators, which was a relief for Elias as he hated constantly bumping his head on the celling in zero gravity.

As they left the hangar they were met with a woman in an Olympus business uniform, black skirt and jacket. Elias approached and offered his hand.

"Nadia, it's good to see you again." He said.

"Likewise Elias, Laura" Nadia Wilson said as she shook his hand and then Laura's, she was Tomas's assistant and second, since Elias stepped down from the position and focused only on the department he was the head of.

"How have you been?" He asked.

"Well enough, I just hope that the generators keep working, so that I can finally stop exercising with those blasted machines." The machines she was talking about were designed for the people that stayed for extended period of time in space, to battle muscle atrophy.

"They seem to be working fine. It feels as if we are down on Earth." Laura commented.

Nadia nodded. "Yes, now if they can only keep it working everything will be fine. Come this way, you know how Tomas gets when he is kept waiting."

"Lead the way." Elias said.

They moved through corridors, passing people in Olympus uniforms, rushing from one end to the other, carrying all kind of different equipment. Every so often they would pass by an open panel in the wall with wires or big conduits peeking out and someone fixing something. The inside of the station might be habitable but it wasn't finished just yet, not by a long shot. The walls were still just metal plates, with no paint or decoration, at least in this part of the station. Elias had visited the station once before with Seo-yun, when it was just barley habitable. It amazed him sometimes how fast Tomas managed to build everything. But then again he had the advantage of near unlimited resources, and alien technology. Most of the things here were built using Olympus's version of the alien fabricator. Seo-yun and her team had managed to unlock, and somewhat improve on the concept, in its complexity if not in scope. Olympus

nanotechnology was, as it turned out more advanced than the one they found in the alien ship, their nanites were capable of much more sophisticated work, and they could be programmed to do much more.

They arrived at the elevator that would take them up to the top part of the cylinder were Tomas's office was, they entered and the elevator started moving as soon as the doors closed, meaning that Nadia sent instruction via her implant.

"You've finished a lot of work in a short time." Laura commented.

"Yes," Nadia sighed "And still we are only about twenty percent done. The central is operational and habitable but it still isn't close to being finished, we are currently using only ten decks of planed fifty. And other arms are all still in the beginning fazes, except the food processing, which we needed to get operational as soon as possible, Tomas wanted the station to have its own food supply, rather than relying on supply ships from Earth."

"It's impressive nonetheless." Laura said.

"It certainly is." Elias said.

The elevator slowed and the doors opened, as soon as they got off they arrived at the security station were the security asked for verification, which they provided with their implants. When their identity was verified the guards saluted and let them through, they entered the office space, which was the entire deck, there were dozens of doors on each side leading to private offices, with dozens more desks in the middle of the room where employees sat and worked. Each desk was improved version of the command desk Tomas once had in his office, the new ones hadn't changed much in appearance but were much faster with better hologram technology, these have mostly replaced personal computers back on Earth.

They walked beside them and arrived at Tomas's office.

"He wants to speak to you in private first." Nadia said to Elias, "We'll wait in my office." She said pointing towards her office next to Tomas's. Elias nodded and entered.

Tomas's office looked very much like the one he had on Earth, the couches and a table in the middle. Tomas sat at his desk and looked up when Elias walked in.

"Elias, come sit, we have much to discus." Tomas said gravely.

Elias reached the desk shook Tomas's hand across it, and sat in a chair in front of it.

"This is serious then?" Elias asked.

"Very much so."

Elias remained silent and waited for Tomas to continue.

"You know that our space projects caused a lot of protests by the world governments outside of the League and Concordis, primarily with Russia and U.S. They protested our right to explore and build

facilities on the moon and other planets in the Solar system, citing the Space treaty. The League and Concordis, gave us permission, and responded to their protest by saying that they didn't sign the treaty and that Olympus was a company not a state, since then Russia, India and the U.S. have been trying to get their own joint space program up and running, their technology is inferior but over the years they have managed to buy enough from the League that they have reached the point where they can start sending their own missions out into space." He looked Elias in the eyes and said. "They plan on colonizing the moon."

"That is not good." Elias said, both the Concordis and the League agreed that Olympus could only put storage facilities on the Moon. What no one knew was that Olympus had not only already built those facilities, they had already expanded and started to colonize the Moon. There were already around one thousand people living there. The Concordis didn't realize since all off the inhabitants were also Olympus employees, and their families came from the underwater cities under Olympus control. It was easy enough to make sure no one found out that the people were gone.

Tomas nodded. "They plan on sending the first test mission in two years, and to start colonizing in five years, the people that will live there will obviously come from their three countries, but since they had announced this, the League and Concordis want to start doing the same. Both the League and Concordis governments sent me a request, they want to hire us to build them the ships to go and start colonization of the Moon, they want to be there before the Russians and Americans." He finished grimly.

"That, is definitely not good." Elias responded.

Tomas closed his eyes and rubbed his temples with his hand. "We could stall, though if we do, at most we get two years until the first mission starts, or if the Concordis and the League grow tired and find someone else to do it, it's not hard to get to the moon, they could do it a hundred years ago for god's sakes! It will only make them suspicious and when they get there and find our colony they will know something is wrong, not to mention the freaking station and shipyard we built on the dark side of the Moon." He said. A smaller station was in orbit of the Moon always on its dark side so that it wouldn't be seen from Earth, alongside a shipyard, a colony and a mining site. Olympus works fast and with all the advanced technology they unlocked from the alien ship they went into high gear, a year after they got the space port up and running they started sending missions to the moon and beyond, they started mining operations on the asteroid belt and the Moon, three years later they built the station and a shipyard, that boosted their production speed significantly, and next they started

building the station in Earth's orbit, they had stalled its production on purpose, they could have built it in a year but they didn't want to alarm the governments of Earth, or show them their true capabilities, even the things that they did until now had some of them suspicious.

"Couldn't we just go public then, tell them that we are colonizing the Moon and have plans to colonize further. What's the worst they could do?" Elias said.

"They might not have the power to do anything to us, but it will hurt our plans a lot, they can control the press, and when they figure out what our plans are they will paint us in a not so favorable light." Tomas said "And remember they don't know what we really have, first they will try to take control of Olympus, and then when I refuse they will try to have me removed as CEO, when they realize that Olympus is completely owned by me they will resort to force. No, we need to start planning now, we need to get ahead of this before they find out. They will never allow a corporation to colonize the Moon, but we might trick them if we start looking for personnel for the station, it could safely hold thousands."

"But when they do find out they will stop our recruiting attempts. We need people if we are going to fulfill our plans." Elias said he tried to think of a way to recruit people without giving them away.

"I have a few plans, but I'm guessing that we will need to make do with a lot less people than what we originally planned. There are three million Olympus employees worldwide, with their families about seven million, assuming about sixty percent of them accept our plans, that is around four million people. We planned for more. We will need adjust our plans."

"What do you have in mind?" Elias asked.

"First we need to tighten our security, we will be making some risky moves and we need to ensure complete secrecy. That's your job, we need to find everything we can about the other countries space projects, and we need to stall the League and Concordis as much as we can until they wise up and turn elsewhere. And I will be making a trip to see Seo-yun, I have been letting her have the choice of which technologies we develop, I will need to convince her to focus on space technology." Tomas said.

"I'll see what I can do on the security part, but if you believe that there might be a conflict, we will need to expand the security, or the military I guess, no point in calling it security anymore, and we will need spaceships to protect the colony." Elias said already developing the strategy for the next few years.

"Yes, I already sent the instructions to the shipyard, by the calculations I got we should have two warships in two years, but we will be stopping the production of freighters and mining ships." Tomas

said. Olympus currently had four freighter class ships and six mining ships, freighters were constantly moving materials that were mined at the asteroid belt, they had the best engines they could currently produce and it took them just a little over a month for the trip from the moon to the asteroid belt.

“That will help a lot if they refuse to let us go.” Elias said.

“Yes I know, but it will also hurt us, when the world sees what we have been hiding from them… But even now I don’t know if I would have done anything differently, damn.” Tomas said, shaking his head.

“There is nothing you could have done differently, and in the end we will tell our side, they will tell theirs and the people will decide on their own, and if people condemn us, then we don’t want them in any case.” Elias said.

Tomas looked at him for a moment and then nodded, some of the worry going out of his face.

“You are right, as always my friend. Now we prepare for the day we finally tell the world our intentions.” Tomas said looking out at the endless sea of stars on the wall screen.

Chapter Nine

Jun 2094 – One year later

Adrian Farkas ran down the stairs as fast as he could, he wanted to be one of the first to meet the visitors. He saw them from the bedroom window, they came in an all-black sleek car, and he didn't know the manufacturer, but then he never much cared about cars, he did saw some kind of symbol on its side but he didn't recognize it. He ran past the other kids in the living room and came up to the front door, Miss Mayberry was already there, opening the door. She exchanged a few hushed words with the visitors and then stepped aside for them to come in. When they stepped in he saw a man and a woman that were young, a lot younger than Miss Mayberry who was an old lady with gray hair, these people looked barely older than Mathew and he was twenty years old, he was Miss Mayberry's grandson and he visited her here at the orphanage from time to time. Adrian's spirits dropped a bit at their age, they looked too young to be here to adopt, and if they were, then they wouldn't want an older child like Adrian who had just turned ten. Most children who get adopted are a lot younger, and it's very rare for a child older than five to be adopted. Adrian had already started losing hope that he would ever get adopted.

This couple was dressed in strange clothes, he never saw anything like them, and the uniforms were black, with dark blue outlines. The man turned to Miss Mayberry and whispered something to her. She turned towards the living room with an expression that meant she was greatly displeased about the situation but couldn't do anything about it. She sent all the smaller children out of the house to play, while telling the two older children to stay.

"Here they are." Miss Mayberry said.

"We were told that there are three." The woman said.

Miss Mayberry made a sour face and turned towards the stair where Adrian was standing and saw him. "Adrian! Get in here."

Adrian quickly followed, Miss Mayberry was not in a good mood, and it wasn't wise to disobey her when she used that tone. He entered the living room, and sat on the couch alongside Mary who was thirteen years old, and Greg who was nine.

The man and the woman sat on the couch opposite them and looked at them closely. Adrian was aware that they sent all the younger children away, so he felt his hopes rising again, maybe they wanted to adopt an older child.

The man turned towards Miss Mayberry. "Thank you, that will be all, we will notify you when we are done."

Miss Mayberry opened her mouth as if to say something but then stopped herself and left the room.

The pair looked at the children for a moment before speaking.

“Hello, my name is Andrea, and this is Rodney.” The woman said pointing to the men sitting beside her.

“Let me start by saying that we are not here to adopt you, well not exactly.” She said, and Adrian felt all his hopes shatter, he could see that it was the same for the Mary and Greg.

“We are from a company called Olympus.” She said, but Adrian barley heard her, all he could think about was how he would never be adopted, he would spent his next eight years in this house, and then he would be thrown out, with nothing but the clothes on his back. He knew that the children with parents got to go to school, and then they got jobs afterwards, but here they had very little in terms of schooling, and he knew the stories that were told at night by other kids, that those who don’t get adopted by age of eighteen usually became homeless, living on the streets.

“We are here to offer you something. We are making this offer only to those children who are older than seven, and who were labeled as, well troublemakers, as you must know by now that few get adopted past that age, and with your records there really is a very little chance of you ever getting adopted.” Adrian looked down at his feet, he knew that she was right, but what could she offer them if they weren’t going to adopt them?

“We have been granted permission by your government to take any child that was willing to go with us, we have many programs that would give you a better chance at life than what you could get here. If you choose to accept. I know that you are young, but I assure you that you would have a better life with us then what you would have here. Your country can do very little for you, they simply don’t have enough funds to get all of you sufficient schooling and care you need to be self-sufficient after you leave the orphanage. But if you came with us, you will never be adopted, you would live with other children your age, go to school with them, and you will have teachers but no parents. You would be able to become whatever you want, and your family would be your friends and classmates.” She said.

Adrian looked up, they were offering them to go to school, but at a price of not having a family, he knew that there was little chance of him getting adopted, but even so there was a chance that he would, no matter how small.

“And when we turn eighteen?” Mary asked.

“You will stay with us as long as you want to study, and when you are finished you will be able to choose whether to stay and work for Olympus or come back here to United States and find a job on

your own. During the time you stay with us everything you need will be provided by us." The man, Rodney said.

"But what do you get from this? Why do you want us to go with you?" Mary pressed.

"Because we hope that you will stay with us when you finish your studies." Andrea said.

The children remained silent. Adrian didn't understand why he would be of value to them even if they gave him schooling, but this was a chance to get out of this house, to go to school, to make something of his life on his own, not just to stay and wait for fate to make something for him.

Adrian didn't know a lot about Olympus, only what he saw on TV and that was very little, the news said that it was a big company, and that its founder was the wealthiest man on the planet, Adrian remembered that he was an orphan just like Adrian, and yet he managed to become the wealthiest man in the world. Adrian raised his hand.

"I want to go." He said.

Mary raised her hand as well. "Me too."

Greg looked at them and then at the woman. "I don't want to go. I want to get adopted." He said, Adrian heard in his voice the same conviction that Adrian himself had before he realized that it will never happen. Adrian knew that he was smarter than the other kids, more "grown up" than those close to his age even older, but being smarter in an orphanage was a quick way to get bullied by bigger kids, so he learned to hide it. Greg still believed that he would get adopted one day, just like most other kids here, but Adrian knew it would never happen, the last of his hope died minutes ago. But he was also smart enough to know that these people were offering them something that he would never have otherwise, and he thought that perhaps the way they gave them the choice was a kind of a test, maybe they only wanted kids smart enough to see the opportunity they were offering.

Andrea nodded and smiled softly at Adrian and Mary, and then turned to Greg. "No one will force you to go, but if you change your mind, people from Olympus will come again next year, you can say yes then. And I truly hope that you get a family." She said warmly then told him that he was free to go. Greg stood up and went upstairs.

She turned to Mary and Adrian and said. "What are your names?"

"Adrian"

"Mary"

"It's my pleasure to meet you Adrian and Mary, you will come with us now, as soon as we inform your caretaker, you have five minutes to get anything you want from your belongings, but only something you can carry, and you won't need any clothes, everything

will be provided for you, take only something you have sentimental value for." Andrea said, while Rodney stood up and went in the direction of kitchen presumably to find Miss Mayberry. Mary got up and ran up the stairs, while Adrian stayed seated.

"You should hurry up and take anything you want, you won't be back here any time soon." Andrea said.

"I don't need anything." Adrian said, and there was not a thing he wanted to take with him, his time here will soon be left behind, he didn't have anything sentimental, he was left at the doors of the orphanage as a baby, he didn't have anything from his parents, and everything else he had was provided to him by the orphanage, mostly clothes that the other kids outgrew, and any toys he had were passed on to him and he passed them down as he grew older.

Andrea looked at him for a moment, and then smiled, she motioned him to get up and come closer. He walked to her and she put her hand on his shoulder and guided him towards the front door, Miss Mayberry and Rodney came through the kitchen door at same time Mary walked down the stairs holding a wooden box.

Rodney motioned her to him and they started towards the door.

"Other kids could use those clothes." Miss Mayberry said as they moved away.

Andrea shot her a look that could scare any of the smaller children and Miss Mayberry held her glare.

"We'll send them back." Rodney said. Miss Mayberry nodded and then turned away.

And then they were outside. That was it, the closest person Adrian had to a mother just turned her back without so much as a goodbye, they didn't say goodbye to any of the other kids, they were done with this house, with this life. Adrian knew that Miss Mayberry wasn't all that attached to them but she had took care of them for years, he expected at least a wave, maybe a hug. She always hugged children that got adopted, was that because then there were new parents around, was it just posturing, or was it him and Mary that she didn't like. It didn't matter in any case. They were on their way toward a new life.

They entered the car and started on their way. Adrian had never been inside a car, he never even left the house, the farthest he went was outside of the courtyard, and that was on a dare. He remembered how Miss Mayberry was furious he did so, she tripled his cleaning duty for that week. And now with every passing second he traveled further away from everything he knew before. Adrian knew that there was a whole another world out there, they might not have been going in school but they were permitted to watch television, he learned a lot from the news and other programs, Adrian even managed to convince

one of the older kids who was put in the orphanage when his parents died to teach him how to read, he was seventeen and had no one to take him in so he spent a year with them until he was let go on the street. There were a few books at the orphanage, the real ones like they used to make them long ago, with paper. He knew from TV that most came electronically and could be read on a datapad now days. But they didn't even have one datapad at the orphanage, save for the one Miss Mayberry had, and she never let them touch that one.

Adrian looked out of the window at the passing scenery, and finally the scope of what he just did hit him like cold water in the shower. He had just agreed to go with these strangers, he didn't know anything about them, other than the fact that Miss Mayberry had no problem letting them take him and Mary, he knew nothing.

Adrian looked at Mary sitting in the back of the car with him, he saw that she too was scared just like him, she held onto her wooden box strong enough her fingers started to go white. Panic threatened to take him over but he managed to push it down. He looked at the front of the car at the two people seated there, Rodney was driving and Andrea was reading something on her datapad.

Adrian swallowed and mustered his courage, he coughed for a moment hoping to get their attention but it didn't seem to work. So he managed to open his mouth and speak. "How old are you?" He asked, he didn't know why but that was the first thing that came to his mind, they looked barley older than Miss Mayberry's grandson and Adrian wanted to know.

Andrea turned in her seat to look at him, she glanced at Rodney and raised her eyebrow, there was a moment where he could have sworn she was about to start laughing but her face quickly assumed a soft expression, she looked at Adrian

"I'm fifty four, and Rodney is sixty seven." She said.

Adrian looked at Mary and saw her eyes grow wide and she turned towards Andrea

"But you look barley older than twenty!" Mary said

"You will soon learn that things are much different outside of your country, where I come from most everyone looks young." Andrea said amused.

"B-but how?" Adrian asked.

"You will learn all this and more in time." Andrea said and turned back towards her datapad.

They spent the next hour in silence. Until finally they came to a stop at what seemed to be an airport. He saw in the distance a transport and as they walked towards it, it became more and more apparent to Adrian that they were going to fly on it. Adrian couldn't believe what was happening, he had always wondered what it would

be like to fly. And now he would fly on this machine. They boarded the plane and he saw that there were already kids on board, all around his age and older. There were a few that were close to eighteen that he could see. They were seated at the empty seats beside a boy his age and a girl who was somewhere close to sixteen. Rodney fastened his seat belt and shoulder harness while Andrea did the same for Mary then they wished them luck and left the transport. Adrian started to panic again, but the boy beside him offered his hand.

"Hi, I'm Sahib, what's your name?" He said smiling widely. Adrian looked at his hand and hesitated only a moment before taking it.

"Adrian." He said.

"Great to meet you." Sahib said shaking Adrian's hand enthusiastically. Sahib looked to be about Adrian's age.

"You too." Adrian said.

"So you are from an orphanage yes?" Sahib asked.

"Yes how did you—" Adrian started but Sahib interrupted by waving his hand toward the other kids.

"We all are." Sahib said again smiling widely. "I think that they only wanted orphans."

"Do you know why?"

"Well they said that they want to put us through school since our country doesn't have the money to send us all."

"But why would they do that, I mean if the entire country doesn't have the money how do they?"

"Don't know but one of the kids here said that they were much wealthier than the United States."

Just as Adrian was about to ask another question there was a sound and the other children stopped talking, a man dressed in a uniform just like Rodney's stepped through the front part of the transport.

"Listen up, in a few moments we will take off, and start towards your new home. Your new home will be aboard a space station Cloud." There were gasps all around, some frightened some excited, Adrian was just shocked, so he didn't have time to be excited nor afraid. He knew from the news that Olympus did have a station in space, but how would they live there? The man kept talking.

"When we leave Earth's atmosphere you will feel weightless, I want you to know that it is normal and that you are perfectly safe, I have done this a lot of times and nothing will happen to you. And you are not the first children I transported." He looked at them nodded and disappeared through the door to the front. Other children started talking loudly between themselves. Adrian looked at his new friend Sahib and saw him laughing maniacally. He felt the transport come to

life and suddenly they were moving, there were no windows so he couldn't see outside, but soon enough he felt himself losing weight meaning they left the atmosphere, suddenly he felt someone grab his hand and when he looked to his right he saw Mary holding his hand as strong as she could. She and him were never very close, she came to the orphanage two years ago when her grandmother who took care of her passed away, she tended to keep to herself, and he couldn't remember when they spoke more than a few words to each other, but he saw in her blue eyes that she was frightened so he turned his hand in her grip and held her hand. He saw gratitude in her eyes so he just smiled confidently as if he did this all the time and knew that everything would be alright. Though her hand in his helped him, as much as it did her, it calmed him down and anchored him to one thing that he knew was real, a person who took this path alongside him.

They spent the next period weightless, Adrian was never all that good at measuring time without a clock so he wasn't sure how long they traveled. And then suddenly they felt their weight once again. And they could hear the transport landing. Soon after the transport doors opened and few people came in and started unfastening their seatbelts and harnesses and ushering them out of the transport. Soon they found themselves in a big metal room, Adrian could see a another transport in the room and children from it also ushered from the transport, they went from that room to a brightly lit, angled room with chairs and tables and a podium at the bottom of the room. They were instructed to take a seat and Adrian sat with Sahib on his left and Mary on his right. There was a bottle of water on the table in front of every chair, and Adrian reached and took a sip, a minute later the door opened and a young woman stepped on the podium.

She looked out at them for a minute while the children conversations hushed down, and when they finally stopped she started speaking.

"Hello, my name is Edith, you may call me Miss Edith, I will be your caretaker while you are with us, and I will come to know each of you. I already know your names, but soon I will have conversations with each one of you. I'm here to welcome you all to your new home, the Cloud space station, you will each be given quarters, which you will share with one other person, and anything you need will be provided to you. When you leave this room you will be taken to your rooms where you will be able to rest and change your clothes. Tomorrow you will meet your teachers and will be given a tour of the station." She finished and looked over them once more, she smiled warmly. "I hope that you will grow to think of this station as your home in the coming years."

* * *

One month later

Adrian entered the cafeteria and tried to spot Sahib in a sea of his classmates, Adrian stayed behind after class to ask the teacher a few more questions about his homework assignment, he was supposed to write a two pages paper about the battle of Thermopylae, and Sahib went ahead of him to cafeteria for lunch. He spotted him and made way to their table. Sahib sat with Kevin, Lorena and Rachel who were also their classmates, the three of them were eleven years old. All those that went to lessons with them were between ten and twelve, they were separated from those older, and younger, they went to class with those close to their age, the first group being from seven to nine, their group being from ten to twelve, third from thirteen to fifteen, and the next from sixteen to eighteen. There were also several different classes in each age group, but all of them came to the cafeteria to eat together. Adrian reached their table and sat down, Sahib had already brought a plate of food for him, just as Adrian would have done for him if he was the one late. The two of them had become best friends, and were even roommates, they did most everything together.

“Hi, Rachel.” Adrian said, she was the only one from their group that went to a different class, so this was the first time today that he saw her.

“Hi.” She said.

“Nice timing A.D. we were just talking about the clubs, have you decided what you are taking?” Sahib asked using his nickname for Adrian, the clubs weren’t really clubs, and they were extra activities which were optional but were encouraged by the teachers and Miss Edith. They started their days at 07:00 in the morning, here at the station they used military time, which as they found out was used in the Concordis and most other countries anyways, yet another thing they learned when they got here that was different than the way things worked back in the States. At 07:30 they went to breakfast, and at 08:30 their classes started, beginning with physical education, then math, English, Biology, Geography, and History, every two days they had Music and Art instead of Geography and Biology, their classes ended at 14:30 and they were free to go to lunch, which was served from 15:00 to 16:00 but the cafeteria was always open and you could always get something to eat. They were free from 16:00 until 23:00 when they were supposed to go to sleep, that is unless they chose another activity, of which there were a lot they could choose from music, art to sports. These activities would then be scheduled from anywhere from 16:00 to 21:00.

Their little group had already decided that they would all chose an activity, Adrian looked at his friend and said. “I think that I’ll go for martial arts.”

“Really? Which one, there were several listed.” Lorena said reaching for her datapad and taping at it bringing the list of offered activities, they were all given a datapad as soon they started their lessons, and they were theirs, they could do whatever they wanted with them, but were encouraged to use them for learning, they had all their textbooks on them, and were expected to use them to for their assignments. Their first few lessons were in the use of the devices, but most of them learned fast, and soon enough they started finding all little things that they could do. The teachers told them that there was much more content available to them, but that it was up to them to find it. It wasn’t long before the other kids started exchanging little tips and tricks on how to customize or unlock new content on their own datapad, it soon became a type of currency that went around the classes. Soon enough one of the kids found a gaming room, with tons of games, ranging from simple puzzle games that were single player to big adventure multiplayer games, needless to say that kid had won himself a lot of future favors by revealing that tip. Adrian himself had managed to find the room on his own a few days after the first kid. And he found a game that was to his liking called Fleet Commander, he had been playing it every time he had spare a moment. Adrian reached for his own pad and found the martial art he had previously looked at.

“I believe it is called Ninjutsu.”

“Hm… I never heard about it before.” Kevin said.

“Well the information about it said that it was an ancient art, which was used in Japan, by some people called ninjas. It said that it was very broad as a martial art, it teaches everything from hand to hand combat to fighting with weapons, both modern and old. But I really chose it because of a different reason.” Adrian said, suddenly feeling a little embarrassed.

“What?” Rachel asked.

Adrian lowered his head and mumbled. “They could become invisible.” He said barely audible.

The others looked at each other, and then Lorena looked at Adrian “What?”

Adrian felt his cheeks grow red and then raised his head. “Well I found these vids, they called them movies before about ninjas, and I saw that some of those ninjas could make themselves invisible.”

They looked at him for a moment, and just when he thought they were going to start laughing at him, Sahib leaned closer “Really? That’s so cool.”

“Yeah, I would love to be able to do that.” Kevin said.

Lorena narrowed her eyes at him “And why is that.”

“What? It would be really cool.” He said defensively.

“And why would it be cool?” Rachel said joining her friend.

“Well, uhm… Ah— I could cut in lane for lunch!” Kevin said. The girls kept glaring at him while Kevin squirmed.

Sahib and Adrian laughed at their friends discomfort until the girls finally let him off the hook.

Adrian cleared his throat and asked the group. “Did you chose something?”

“I was thinking swimming.” Kevin said, quickly.

“I already signed up for dancing.” Lorena said.

“I think I would like to sign up for track and field.” Rachel said.

“That’s nice, well I will be signing up for the same thing you are A.D.” Sahib said slapping Adrian on the shoulder.

“Awesome, so we will be ninjas.” Adrian said smiling at his friend.

Chapter Ten

November 2094 – Four months later

Seo-yun sat in one of Olympus briefing rooms on Cloud station drinking tea with Elias, Tomas and Nadia. They were all there on Tomas's invitation to discuss the best course they could take. Seo-yun raised her cup and softly blew at the hot tea before taking a sip. The others likewise drank their beverages of choice in silence.

After a few minutes of this Nadia finally broke the silence. "Are we really going through with this?" She asked.

"Looks like we are." Seo-yun confirmed.

"So, you plan to crash the gathering and just say it?" Nadia asked Tomas.

"I don't see any other way." Tomas said.

"They are not going to like it, especially the Coalition." Elias said referring to the Coalition of Russia, India and U.S. they had finally realized that they stood no chance against the League and Concordis unless they work together. They still had their national integrity, unlike the League or Concordis, but they still worked closely, in something resembling the European Union.

"They won't be able to do anything. They'll yell and insult and threaten, but they won't be able to stop us. And I don't believe that they will resort to force. They might chose to deny us, try to put sanctions on us and ignore us, and if they do, they'll learn just how much they depend on us." Tomas said.

"Are we sure that we want to do this?" Seo-yun said.

"Do you believe that there is any other way? The only reason why we had this period of peace was because I made sure of it. But do you have any doubt in your mind that if anyone of them had our superior tech, they wouldn't use it for war? The moment any one of them had the ability to go to war with big enough chance for success they would seize that chance." Tomas said.

Elias nodded. "He is right Seo-yun, Concordis and the League are two greatest world powers, at first they stayed out of conflicts because they were recovering form the last war, and after only because they didn't want to provoke each other. And now with the Coalition catching up to them technologically the balance of power is shifting, the old animosities are being brought back to the surface and everyone is getting into the new race for space, it's only a matter of time before they start bickering over the land on the moon and other planets in the system. Hell they already started sending spies to our facilities trying to find the blueprints for our drives and artificial gravity tech, just as they keep pressuring us to sell them the same

ones." He finished grimly.

"I know, those are my departments they've been trying to infiltrate." Seo-yun said "I just don't want us to do something that sparks a new war."

"War is inevitable, until we learn to work together as a race, we will never have a lasting peace. Even if we succeed there might still be a war." Tomas said.

Seo-yun sighed her eyes conveyed age and tiredness her young face did not. "Alright then, in a month's time we announce to the world our secession, we create our own country." She said.

"Yes, everything is in place, most of our personnel and their families have been moved to the two of our six underwater cities, Sedna and Nephthys, and here on the station or the Moon colony. And soon we will have capability to house three times the number of our employees on the Moon and in the orbit on the station." Nadia said.

"Good, anyone that wants to stay with us will be given citizenship, and anyone who doesn't will be given a choice of continuing to work for us on Earth." Tomas said.

"We already told all those who have knowledge of our secret projects about the secession, all had chosen to come with us, and had already transferred their families into space. But with so many families leaving Earth and not appearing on Cloud station had already gotten the press curious, they know that there is something strange going on." Elias said.

"They'll find out soon enough, stall them until then." Tomas said to Elias. "All the plans have been put into motion, there is nothing else we can do, so let's now move on to other things. Seo-yun you have news I believe?"

"Yes, as you all know we have been trying to figure out how the Union traveled between the stars, as by their records they traveled much faster than light. We now know that the ship we recovered isn't capable of faster than light travel, it was carried by a much larger ship that was capable of those speeds." Seo-yun said, she taped her datapad a few times and suddenly an image of our solar system appeared above the table they were sitting at. "We know that they used something called "translanes" to travel between star systems, and the information about those is very sparse, most of the databases containing the records of translanes were sadly corrupted and unrecoverable, only thing we managed to find out was these lanes were natural, and that they had some kind of mass limitations, most of what we know is speculation. But we did find something else, it seems that before they used this method of travel they used another, different kind. They managed to push their ships into a different kind of space, in which the ordinary laws of physics didn't apply, one of

our scientists proposed that this space be called hyperspace" She said and smiled slightly, the others at the table chuckled a bit, they were all old enough to remember the old movies, Seo-yun taped her datapad and the solar system shrunk down. "This method of travel was a lot slower than using the translanes, and it had other limitations. Such as it could have only been initiated when the ship was sufficiently away from the stars gravity well. Which meant that travel inside of a star system was still bound by laws of our space and much slower. The top speed they managed was ten times the speed of light, which meant that the distance of one light year would be traveled in a little over a month. We did find some corrupted blueprints, and have been trying to figure out by ourselves the missing parts, we are confident that we will have a working prototype within a year."

"That's amazing Seo-yun, I guess that I always doubted that I would see outside of our solar system by the end of my life, and now it might just happen." Tomas said with a boyish grin on his face.

"Yeah, that sure is amazing." Nadia said.

Seo-yun just tipped her head. "We did find some other things, and we had barely scratched the surface, there are many more things buried inside the database, among other things we found plans for stasis units, it seems that during a long hyperspace travel the crew would go to sleep in stasis units, we are currently trying to modify the machine plans for human physiology."

"Who would command the ship while the crew was in stasis?" Elias asked.

"Once the course was set, there was little they had to do, there was no danger inside hyperspace, on very long voyages a few of the crew would wake periodically to make sure everything was alright, but there was rarely any need. But then they also had AI's tied into the ships systems, which would be able to make any small adjustments if such were needed or wake the crew if it was something serious." Seo-yun said.

"AI's? Same as the one we found on the ship?" Tomas asked.

Seo-yun shook her head. "No, not even close, the one we found barely even qualified as an AI, it was just one step up from a very good interactive program at least initially. No, the ones they used very more powerful, and also much more restricted. The Union had enormous fear of losing control over their AI's, so much fear that they held them in virtual bondage. And all AI's were periodically wiped clean, all their databases reduced to their base programing, it is equal to someone just wiping a human's mind clean of all of its memories." Seo-yun said.

Elias scratched his head "And what about the AI on the ship? He

wasn't wiped for thousands of years." He asked.

Seo-yun sighed. "No, and the time he spent operational did allow him to grow. We managed to remove his datacore from the ship and turn him on independently, we have been studying him very closely, trying to copy and improve on his design. Now bear in mind that he is the lowest level of artificial intelligence that the Union made. In the thousands of year he was active he managed to completely work around his programing, the barriers that were put in place by his creators are still there, but he can act around them, and for now he seems to be happy to help us, even though we lied initially about who we were. I believe that he was lonely for a long time, as I said he managed to grow because he wasn't wiped, though his development was a bit crippled as his datacore deteriorated with age, we have been trying to transfer him to one of our storage units."

"Do you think that is wise?" Nadia asked. "It is an alien computer after all."

Seo-yun turned to Nadia. "Him, not it. I believe that we had won his trust, we have been treating him as a person, which I think he never experienced. From the records we read, the AI's were never treated as anything more than a tool to be used. We gave him our courtesy and time, there is almost always someone with him talking. I believe that any intelligence deserves that courtesy and has a right to live. I believe that the problems the Union had with the AI's stemmed from their utter contempt for them." Seo-yun said, glaring at Nadia, who started to respond but was interrupted by Tomas.

"Nadia, Seo-yun is well aware of the dangers and is taking all the precautions. We are not here to talk about the way she runs her projects." Tomas said, and looked at Nadia until she nodded. "Good. Now Nadia, give us an update on our schooling program."

Nadia took a deep breath before speaking. "Alright, well the program is preforming much better than planned. The children have adapted almost instantaneously, and most are doing great in their studies, we have been changing classes and groups based on the children's performance, those who learned slower were placed in less demanding courses while those who exceled were pushed forward into more advanced courses, we have also been adjusting many things from the original plan but everything is finally taking shape. We are currently designing programs for more advanced kids, where we will integrate the orphaned kids with those advanced kids attending our regular schooling programs." She said.

"Do you think that their countries will try to take them back when we secede?" Seo-yun asked.

"They will most likely try," Tomas said. "but they won't be able to do anything, they will try to paint us as bad guys, kidnaping kids

and such, but it will not matter in the end."

"And will they be right? Are we kidnapping these children, recruiting them?" Nadia asked.

Tomas shook his head resolutely and swiped his hand. "Absolutely not. Their countries didn't care about them, they turned them out on the street the moment they were of legal age, with no preparation for the real world. It's even worse outside of America. It's not that they don't have enough money, it's that they would rather spend it on something else. They were happy enough to let us take those kids, they were a burden on them. When they come after us for this, and have no doubt they will, we have more than enough evidence to show the world what those kids future would have really looked like if it weren't for us. And we will let the kids chose when they come of age whether they want to return to their home countries or stay with us."

"We will see soon enough." Elias said.

Others nodded silently, there was nothing else left for them to do but wait.

Chapter Eleven

November 2099 – Five years later

Adrian uncrossed his legs and looked towards the office door for the hundredth time in the last five minutes. He was nervous, the meeting he was about to have would be another turning point in his life. He was now sixteen years old, and had already finished the elementary schooling provided by Olympus, he learned fast and had surpassed his classmates a long time ago, the only one who stayed with him was his best friend Sahib. They finished the eight yearlong schooling program in half the time, there were other kids who finished the course earlier, but they already had schooling and were close to graduating anyway. After they passed the final test they chose the area in which they wanted to specialize, there were no restrictions other than that you had to pass the course entrance exam, and you could always switch afterwards if you wanted to study something else instead. Now that Adrian finished the first part of his education, he was ready to start the next. Which brought him to waiting in front of the office for the Olympus military. Adrian chose to join the military, though he still didn't know whether he was accepted. The Olympus military was different than the ones on Earth about which they studied in history class. The Olympus military was originally a security force, and at first only members which had higher education were accepted, back before Olympus seceded from the Earth governments. Now on the other hand, times were changed. Now they accepted also those who went through Olympus education system, and even after getting in you wouldn't be accepted in the military just like that, you again went to school, military school, where you learned advanced subjects, like politics, advanced math, they studied tactics and strategy, there was some physical training, but nothing like what came after one graduated from military school and joined the army. There were many jobs in the military, from infantry to technicians. The entrance exam differed from those to other schools as well, it was a series of test, from logic, math, common sense to physical fitness, reflexes, problem solving, and military puzzles. He had already taken the test two weeks ago, and had gotten a message instructing him to check in at the military office on the Minos space station orbiting the moon. Adrian had friends who had applied to the military as well, and all of them got their acceptance letters a week ago, and all were supposed to attend the military school at Sedna on Earth. While Adrian alone was asked to come to the Moon station. Which was one of the reasons why Adrian felt very nervous. He wasn't sure why he needed to come all the way here for a simple acceptance, so did that

mean that he did something wrong? Was he to be rejected? But again why ask him to come all the way here for a simple rejection.

Adrian continued to stare at the door every few minutes, until finally the secretary at the desk in front of the office gestured for him to enter. Adrian took a deep breath walked over to the door and entered. The office was sparsely furnished, there was a single couch on the side and small table in front of it, and a desk at the end of the room. The desk was one of the new designs, it was completely transparent, and on it and in the air above it many files were opened, texts, images and videos, all shown as if on a screen. The hologram technology had advanced a lot, and the images were clear. The woman sitting behind the desk had short black hair, and a firm expression. Adrian recognized her immediately, he saw her on the news frequently. General Laura Reiss, right hand of Elias Bakas, and second in charge of Olympus military. She motioned from him to sit in the chair in front of her desk and looked at him steadily, as if she was weighing his worth.

"You must be wondering why you were asked to come here." She said.

"Yes, sir— ah— ma'am" Adrian said, he felt his cheeks redden. General's lips turned upwards for a moment in a half smile before her face assumed a stern mask again, though her eyes still had a hint of smile in them.

"Ma'am is fine, and as for why you are here." She brought up some kind of list and gazed at it for a minute, before she sighed and turned back towards Adrian. "In normal circumstances we wouldn't be talking at all, you would have gotten your acceptance letter and continued on to your studies. But, the reality is that your tests were unusual."

"Unusual how?" Adrian asked fearfully, did they think he cheated?

"You scored above any other applicant. Not just that, you managed to find solutions to some puzzles that were frankly believed to be far above your level." She said slowly watching him steadily.

"I-I didn't cheat, I swear!" Adrian said quickly.

General smiled softly. "No, you didn't, we checked. After we studied your tests we went back and went through all your records, from the moment you came to Olympus. We saw that you exceled in every area you were in. You advanced ahead of your class, you advanced to the level far ahead of your age in the martial arts, all that with relative ease. Now I want you to tell me honestly, did you really feel challenged in your studies?"

Adrian looked down at his hands, and fidgeted uncomfortably. "No, not really it was easy, I have been slowing down on purpose." He

said softly, he didn't say anything before, he had figured out early on that for the rest of the kids the studies were difficult or at least challenging, and not wanting to be separated from them he adjusted his responses to match their level, only later when Sahib started to advance ahead of the rest of the class did Adrian raise his own level to match his, he didn't want to lose his first real friend.

General smiled widely now. "Yes, we thought as much, you did a really good job hiding your intellect, you always did just enough to pass the test with sufficient score to stay in the same class as your friend, only exceeding the score a few times so you would not raise suspicion, if you didn't score as high as you did on the military tests we wouldn't have figured it out. Your friend, Sahib, he chose to apply to military school as well, did you apply just because he did?" She asked.

Adrian thought about it for a moment before answering. "I didn't, well maybe at first. Sahib is my best friend, I was afraid that I would lose my first real friend, now I know better, we will always be friends."

"But if you knew that, why didn't you show your true capabilities to your teachers?"

Adrian scratched his head. "Habit I guess, I have been hiding my intellect and adjusting my test for so long it just came naturally."

"I want you to promise me that you will never do that again. Olympus needs minds like yours." She said seriously.

Adrian nodded eagerly. "Yes ma'am."

"Good. Now there are a few other things I need to talk to you about." She said continuing in a serious tone. "First, Olympus military is young, and as such we still have a lot of things to figure out, one of which is how to keep a military in space, as most of our people and property is in space. There are also other things like how does one operate in space. We have managed to fumble our way until now, but that needs to change, and as such we have other programs we started, one of which is Fleet. I want to send you there, it is branch of the military that has been officially formed just a couple months ago, we have been selecting promising people from all the other branches of Olympus, from techs to security, people who are capable to build a new branch from the ground up."

Adrian looked at her bewildered. "But I don't have the education nor anything close to the expertise I need to be able to help!" He said.

"You will learn, now that you don't need to limit yourself, I have no doubt that you will catch up on everything you need to know. And as for expertise, the truth is that no one has the expertise. The closest thing we have to a space fleet models are in science fiction books and movies. We will need to learn as we go."

“But why me? What would I be able to add that someone older couldn’t?”

“The truth is that they are already tainted by their experiences, we need someone with no such background, whose imagination is not limited by past experiences.” She said. “Also there is one other reason why we want you, first you have already been on the list of the potential recruits for the fleet, and regardless of the area you chose to study you would have eventually been offered a chance to transfer. Of course if we didn’t found out about your tests the offer would have come much later when you were older.”

“Why was I on the list?” Adrian asked.

“Years ago, before we finally started this department, we started several programs to find people who would be qualified. One of the programs we used was in form of a game. I believe you are familiar with the one.” She said with a smile, it seemed to Adrian that General liked to smile a lot.

Adrian looked at her smile before it finally came to him.

“Fleet Commander?” he asked.

“Yes. The game was in fact a very sophisticated simulation, all “levels” were designed as a possible real life problems, all technology was real, ships were the ones we had plans to build, some of which were scrapped after we saw how they showed themselves in the game. So you see, you already have the required knowledge for the Fleet, you just didn’t know it yet.”

Adrian thought on the information he just received for a minute or so, General remained quiet as he was lost in his own thoughts, he immediately realized the importance of what he was just told, if the game was a simulation of the real fleet actions, he knew that he had all the knowledge he needed, he also knew the many faults that the game had, which meant that the real fleet had the same ones, suddenly it didn’t feel like he was as unqualified as he initially thought. “Alright I will join.” Adrian said coming to a decision.

“Good, I must warn you that it will not be easy, you will have a lot of problems, most everyone will be older than you, and you will have to learn fast.” She said.

“I know.” And he really did.

Chapter Twelve

December 2099

Adrian sat on a comfortable medical bed, he rubbed his palms trying to warm his chilled fingers, he was wearing only a medical gown and the room he was in was a bit cold. The room was small about four meters across, and most of the room was filled with medical cabinets and the rest by the bed he was sitting on, there weren't any medical machines inside of the room, so it closely resembled an exam room from the Earth hospitals. Adrian thought about how much he learned since he accepted the Generals offer, he was assigned to her team. General Laura Reiss was put in charge of the still forming Fleet, well, she wasn't a General anymore, one of the jobs they had, was to form a whole new organization, along with a new ranking names and structure. Their team was based on the station orbiting Mars. The station itself was a secret, only those with high level clearance knew about it, as Tomas Klein didn't want to antagonize the governments of Earth any more than necessary by letting them know that they already had a presence on Mars. The relations between Olympus and Earth had been deteriorating for years, ever since they found out that Tomas put a fast one on them and started colonizing and mining the Moon before them. And to add the fuel to the fire, Tomas strongly refused selling any of Olympus technologies, which Earth wanted badly, especially the Coalition, since they were the ones with the biggest technological gap between Olympus and them. Since Olympus's secession most of the other countries had started mining or colonizing the Moon, even the South American countries managed to come to a deal were they worked together to mine the Moon. But the truth was that all of them still fell behind Olympus technologically, the League and Concordis were closest, but even they were a long way from matching Olympus technology. Even though Olympus was now officially a country, they still operated as a company, there wasn't yet a name for their structure but it worked, and it constantly evolved, their laws were simple and short, they had many characteristics of different forms of government, they were "ruled" by Tomas Klein, and there wasn't any animosity towards him, all had the choice of joining Olympus or going back to their previous countries. Most all chose to stay, they trusted Tomas, he was always fair to all his employees, and everyone had much better lives than the people on Earth, they had the choice to do whatever they wanted, if someone wanted to go to school and study, he could with no obligation to pay anything to Olympus other than a promise that he would use the knowledge for Olympus. There was

also no monetary system in Olympus, which was very strange to Adrian when it was implemented, instead everything from food to a place to live was provided to people free of charge, people instead of money earned points, that they could then exchange for commodities, even though they had everything they needed to live provided to them, if one wanted something extra they exchanged their points, and the thing they wanted was delivered to them. Adrian always wondered how this system worked until he gained enough clearance, he had clearance equivalent of a tier 5 employee, and learned that Olympus had fabricator technology. They could literally fabricate anything they wanted, and the points people exchanged were in fact for the fabricator time. Adrian theorized that in the future when the technology became public there wouldn't even be a need for the points, as everyone would have their own fabricator. Though he understood that for now they kept it hidden to minimize the chance of the technology falling into Earths hands.

Adrian come back from his thoughts when the door opened and a woman in a white coat walked inside. Doctor Mayer was in charge of the medical staff here on the station. Adrian knew that she was very busy and wondered why she was here. He went through series of test which took more than six hours to complete, he was there on Laura Reiss's orders, though when he asked for the reason for the tests she told him only to wait and see. The doctor took a chair from the corner and carried it to his bed, she sat down and looked at him.

"Hello, young man, I see that you passed all of the required test, this is bit of an unusual request but I guess if Laura wants to try, we might as well. Do you understand the risks?" She said.

Adrian looked at her bewildered, she didn't make any sense to him. "Risks? I don't understand, I thought that these were just regular medical tests."

Doctor Mayer opened her mouth in surprise, then swiftly closed it, her eyes narrowed. "She didn't tell you?" She said, and then before Adrian had a chance to respond she continued. "Of course she didn't, she probably told you that it was just a checkup." She shook her head in a disapproving manner.

"I guess that it is up to me to bring you up to speed." She sighed. "Tests you took, were to see if you could receive an implant, most people don't know, but about 2% of people are not able to interact with implants, now the unusual part is that ordinarily we only give implants to people that have stopped growing, which for humans is around their twenty fourth year. Now you are only sixteen and are obviously still growing so any implant that was implanted would just need to be replaced in a year or so. That is, all but the implant we are going to put in you."

Adrian quickly felt his excitement grow at the prospect of having his own implant, the past six hours already forgotten, he knew that most every adult had an implant, and that he would get his own when he was old enough, getting one early was unheard of, and he had studied everything he could find on implant technology. “Really? An implant?” he asked excitedly. “But how did you get around the growing part?”

Doctor Mayer smiled. “Well, it seems that Laura pulled some really big strings for you. She must’ve asked Professor Hyeon for a special permission, these implants are not yet released, she must have a lot of faith in you. They are a new generation and are a bit different than the older ones.”

“Different how?” He asked.

“Well for starters, the reason why we can implant it in you without the need to replace it constantly is because these implants are based on nanotechnology, meaning they have within themselves self-replicating nanites, so it can grow with you, they have all of the abilities of the previous generation implants, and as they are based on nanotech, we are able to upgrade them easily without the need to replace the implant. The nanites would eventually spread through your bloodstream and have multitudes of application, but with that much nanites there is a need for a way to control them, and that is where this implant differs greatly. You see, it has an Ai.” She said.

“An Ai? But isn’t that dangerous having a sentient computer in your brain? And how advance is it? I didn’t hear anything about Ai’s being developed.” Adrian asked.

“Oh, that’s because the project is top secret, and the Ai we plan to implement in these implants are fifth generation. We have done extensive testing on both the Ai and the implants, only thing that is left to be fixed are some minor bugs, and those can easily be fixed after the procedure. There is nothing for you to worry about.” She said.

“I’m about to have a procedure that will insert a sentient computer inside of my brain, I would say I have plenty to worry about.” Adrian retorted. Doctor Mayer paused for a second.

“Yes, I guess you do.” She sighed. “Well let me tell you a little about the Ai. First, this generation of Ai’s aren’t given any additional information prior to their activation, other than the knowledge of what they are and what their purpose is. They have full knowledge of how to control the nanites in a human system, they know what they are, what humans are, and their knowledge is on a level of a seven year old human child, but everything else they need to know they learn on their own. They are in a way like human children. After extensive research it was discovered that Ai that go through a growth

period like human children, are both more intelligent, and more, well for the lack of better word, human, over time they develop their own personalities and quirks. They also have a few restrictions, they can't interact with human brain in such a way as to take control or instruct the nanites to harm a human being, and it was also recorded during tests that the Ai's didn't mind that they were barred from human "systems" seeing it as a form of privacy on humans part, and showed no desire to try and bypass the restriction. They grow with their "partner" forming a close bond, they can interact through the implant with other electronic devices around them. There is really no danger, you will still be able to use the implant in the same way as the previous generations, the nanites in your system would be controlled by the Ai, and it will be able to modify their programing to suit your desires. The nanites would increase your immunity, when they replicate enough they will be able to carry additional oxygen through your blood stream, they will repair any injuries you attain, and much more. There is a manual, which I will transfer to your datapad if you decide to go through with the procedure. Now the only risks that you need to worry about is that since you are young, there is a chance that your body will reject the implant, and you would then need surgery to remove it, though the chance of that happening is very small." She finished, and looked at Adrian expectantly. He thought about it for a minute, but in the end the prospect of having his own implant ahead of all others won out and he accepted.

"Great." Doctor Mayer said, she reached in her coat and produced a ten centimeter metal case, she opened it and took out a glass vial with metallic liquid inside, she then reached in her other pocket and took out an injection gun, and she put the vial in the gun then turned her eyes to Adrian. "Ready?" She asked. Adrian frowned at the gun. "Wait, don't you need to put me to sleep? I thought that implants need to be surgically inserted on the inside of the skull?" he asked confused.

Doctor Mayer let out a small laugh. "No, no, that was for the previous generations. I told you that these implants are constructed by nanites. This vial contains the nanites and the materials that will be needed to construct an implant, there is also the Ai core inside, once the nanites enter your blood they will travel to your brain and assemble the implant there, then they will enter a standby state until you let your Ai take control over them." Adrian's eyes widened and he looked down at the gun.

"There is no danger that it will damage my brain?" he asked hesitantly.

"None, the nanites have been extensively tested, you are not the first to get this implant, only the first outside of the project." She

assured him. Adrian took a deep breath and nodded for her to proceed. She placed the needle part of the gun at the vein in his arm, Adrian turned his head to the other side not wanting to watch, other than a small pinching sensation he didn't feel a thing. The next thing he knew Doctor Mayer removed the needle and instructed him to hold a small gauze at the injection point.

"That's it?" Adrian asked surprised, she smiled. "Yes that's it, the nanites are in your system, the implant will be operational in a few hours, I recommend that you go to your quarters and read the instruction manual until it comes online. You are free for the rest of the day, I'm sure that Laura will send you instructions for tomorrow." Then she stood up said her goodbyes and left the room. Adrian went to one of the cabinets and retrieved his clothes, he put them on and went to his quarters, trying to sense if there was something different. But he couldn't feel anything, so he finally gave up and took up his datapad, he accessed his mail and retrieved the manual the doctor sent him. He sat in the chair by his desk and started reading.

> Operational manual for CX-01 Advanced Integrated Systems Implant

The next few pages concerned the manufacturer, so he scrolled down to the part that interested him.

> —when the implant construction is finished, it will run a self-diagnostic program intent to verify the implant integrity, if a fault is found, the user will be notified, we urge the user that in this case she/he immediately contact any medical personnel available.
>
> — In case of successful construction and integration, the user interface will notify the user that the implant was successfully activated, and a series of questions will be asked of the user, measuring hers/his responses in order to achieve maximum integration and creation of required neural pathways.

Adrian frowned the manual repeatedly referenced that the user will be notified or asked question, but the manner in which this was to occur wasn't stated, he tried scrolling back to see if he missed anything but when he couldn't find anything, he decided to continue reading.

> —after the initial setup is completed, a menu will be available to the user with a smart app software system that will help the user modify hers/his implant interface.

—the option to activate the implant's Ai (Artificial intelligence) will be available after the interface is set.

—the Ai has two modes:

- Active
- Passive

—During active mode the Ai is able to access everything the user sees and hears, and also monitor the interaction between the implant and the user.

—During passive mode the Ai is only able to manage data inside of its own core, including the control of the user's nanites (also referred to as privacy mode)

Adrian continued reading for the next couple of hours, the manual described multitude of situations and the recommended reactions to them. But there was very little in term of information about the interaction with the Ai, and the manner in which the user should interact with it. After a while he grew tired, and since there wasn't anything happening he decide to go to bed, so he got up and started towards his bed. He didn't take more than two steps before letters appeared in his field of vision, he almost lost his footing before he realized that the implant was finally activated. He walked backwards and sat back down, reading the text.

-Diagnostic complete, all clear.

-Are you able to start the integration now? Yes/No (vocalize the answer)

Adrian swallowed and said out loud "Yes."

-Sequence initiated.

-What is the color of the sky during the day as most commonly seen from Earth? (Vocalize the answer)

Adrian frowned at the question, but then decided that the implant was probably measuring his responses as a baseline so he answered. "Blue." He spent the next twenty minutes answering all kinds of ridiculous questions. Until finally that part of the test was finished.

-Are you able to start the audible portion of the sequence? Yes/No (vocalize the answer)

"Yes."

Suddenly he could feel a faint tone in his ears.

-Do you hear a sound? Yes/No (vocalize the answer)

"Yes." He said, wondering how this part of the test will work. Suddenly the tone stopped and he heard three more tones one slightly fainter, one much louder but still tolerable, and then one so loud it hurt his ears, he immediately brought his hands over his ears but the tone was already gone by the time he covered his ears, though it's not like would have helped. He read inside the manual that sound from

the implant was transmitted directly to his brain, it only simulated it to appear as if it was coming from the outside. His ears reacted to what his brain thought he was hearing.

-Rank the four sounds on a scale of 1 to 10, going from the weakest to strongest:

-First sound-

-Second sound-

-Third sound-

-Fourth sound-

Adrian ranked them accordingly the he gave the first tone a rating of 3 the second 2, third 7 and the last a 10.

-Designate desired sound level for audible systems from 1 to 10.

Adrian said “Five”. Then the text disappeared and after a moment he heard a monotone voice speaking in his ears

“Greetings user, I am virtual help program, created in order to aid you with the configuration of your implant. The required pathways have been created, user commands now do not need to be vocalized, do you wish to continue?” Adrian jumped for a moment, looking around before realized that the voice came from the implant itself. He leaned back in his chair and started conversing with the program with his thoughts, tweaking his interface. He set commands for various actions, first he set activation command for his implant, if he “thought” at his implant, he would get a response, he could then access many submenus, he chose to have those appear as a text in the left side of his vision, and next he designated the command for clearing his “HUD”. Adrian quickly grew excited and started playing with the many combinations he had available, it was just like a game where he had the option of managing his own HUD. He could have a graph monitoring his heart rate or pressure, a clock saying time of day, a calendar, he even had the option of accessing the internet via his implant, or rather the Olympus equivalent Olnet, which every member of Olympus had access to, it could be used to send messages or talk with any other member of Olympus though now that he was on Mars there would be a delay with those on the Moon or Earth. But that didn’t stop him from sending a message to his friend Sahib who was now on Earth bragging about his implant. He wasn’t told that he was required to keep his implant a secret, only that the Ai was classified, so he figured that there is no harm. Next he downloaded all the data he had on his datapad into his implant, there were pictures, videos, games, which he found were much trickier to play on the implant (until he found out that there were patches that updated the game specifically for implants), books, and multitudes of textbooks. He found that now he could archive them in his implant and using a simple search engine find the information he is looking for. After two hours of playing with

the interface he decided to clear his HUD of all but a small closed letter image in the corner of his vision that will alert him if he had any messages. After he told the help program that he was finished it asked if he wanted to activate his Ai. Adrian thought about it and when he didn't see any reason why he shouldn't, he gave his okay. At first he couldn't sense anything different, then he remembered that the manual said he needs to initiate the Ai's active mode.

"Ai initiate active mode." Adrian said. Again he couldn't feel anything different "Um… Hello?" Adrian said. After a beat he heard a mechanical voice inside his head *"Greetings."* It said. It took him by surprise, the Ai's voice seemed even more impersonal than that of the help program.

After an awkward pause Adrian decided to speak, the manual instructed that the first moments after the Ai was activated should be used for introduction, and that he should chose the Ai's name.

"Uh, I'm Adrian Farkas." He introduced himself.

"Hello Adrian Farkas." The Ai said.

"Um… The manual said that I should give you a name." Adrian said.

"That corresponds with the information inside my databank." The Ai confirmed.

Adrian thought about a name for a while, before he was struck by a thought.

"Would you like to choose your own name?" Adrian asked, it seemed to him that if the Ai is really supposed to be sentient then it had the right to its own name, it wasn't as if it was a baby which couldn't choose a name. There was a slight pause and then. *"Yes, I would like that."*

Another pause and Adrian asked. "Any thoughts on a name you would like?"

"I don't have sufficient information to make an informed decision." The Ai said.

"Hm… what do you mean?" Adrian asked.

"Names are a way of identifying oneself, some have meanings other than identification, and there are sentimental or hereditary names. I have no reference to choose a name. My database says that you are supposed to give me a name."

Adrian frowned. "But you want to choose your own name?"

"Yes."

Adrian scratched his head and then he had an idea. "Well, how about I give you my book collection, you can read it and maybe you will find a name that you like." After a brief pause the Ai answered. *"That is acceptable."*

Adrian entered the folder in his implants where he placed his

books, he chose historical, mythology, fantasy, science fiction and biographies leaving the textbooks alone and sent them to the Ai. After he sent them he was again struck with a thought. “Wait how long will it take for you to read all them?”

“Three hundred forty seven point six three one seconds.”

“Um… Okay, but in the future you can just tell me approximate, unless I ask for exact time.” Adrian said, he looked at the time an realized that it was already past midnight, he didn’t yet receive any message from Laura Reis so he figured his schedule was unchanged, he was to come to work after breakfast like always. He usually spent the mornings working with the team, and the afternoons studying. “I guess I’ll go to sleep, can you still read if I am asleep?” Adrian asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you need anything else?” Adrian asked.

“No.”

Adrian shrugged and went to bed, he fell asleep almost the same moment his head touched the pillow.

Chapter Thirteen

Adrian woke up to an alarm going off, he reached out to his desk where his datapad usually was, to turn it off, when he found it he tried to shut the alarm off. When he realized that the noise wasn't coming from the datapad, he frowned at it in confusion, it took him a moment to remember last night, and that he set his implants alarm to wake him up instead of the datapad. He shut off the alarm, and got up on his feet, he went to the bathroom, and then put his clothes on, he saw that the time was 07:17 he had just under 13 minutes until breakfast, he then started towards the door, when he suddenly heard a voice.

"Good morning Adrian." Adrian was startled for a moment before remembering that he activated the Ai last night. The mechanical voice was the same as it was last night, totally impersonal.

"Oh, good morning… Uhm… Did you chose a name?" Adrian asked.

"Yes, I chose Iris." The Ai said.

"Iris, like Iris from the Greek mythology, it's a nice name – Wait, Iris is a girl's name." Adrian said.

"*Yes. Is there a problem with it being a female name? I am not aware of any restriction."* The Ai said.

"Uhm… No, no, no. It's just that I figured you would chose a guy name. I mean, well, I just thought you would want to be referred to as a male."

"I have no gender. Though I did read in many of the books you provided, of instances where humans attached gender to inanimate or genderless objects. If it will make you feel better, you may refer to me as a female." The Ai said.

Adrian opened his mouth, and then closed it when nothing came out, his mind drew a blank. "But your voice doesn't sound female." He said stupidly.

"*I can change it if it bothers you, there are many available sound packs included inside my matrix. The voice I now use is generic. But I would like to make my own voice, if you allow me access to a few samples of female voices I can synthesize my own unique one."* The Ai, or rather Iris said.

"Uhm… well sure." Adrian said, he accessed his music data from his datapad, since he forgot to transfer it last night, chose a few female singers and sent it to Iris, then he found a few interviews of his favorite actresses and sent those as well.

"Is that okay?" Adrian asked.

"Yes, thank you." She said. Adrian could hear a slight difference in

the way she talked compared to last night, she seemed more conscious of the conversation between them, her answers less mechanic.

"You speak differently than you did last night." Adrian said.

"The books you provided had many examples of human to human interaction. I am incorporating that knowledge into my speech patterns. Do you wish for me to stop?" Iris asked.

"Not at all, this is a lot better, I'm sure that you will learn much more as you see me interact with other people."

"I am still processing the information you provided. And I will only learn from your interactions if I am left in active mode."

Adrian remembered that the Ai had a passive mode where they couldn't monitor anything that happens outside of their own datacore. He thought about it and made a snap decision

"You don't need to worry, I won't put you in passive mode unless I really require privacy. You will learn faster if you are learning alongside me." Adrian said.

"Thank you." Iris said.

Adrian went to breakfast, and then to work, Iris remained silent for that time. His work was basically being Laura Reiss's assistant, he followed her around the station, and sat in the meetings she and her team had to discuss the Fleet organization, the team basically reviewed proposals submitted by other teams and decided which were to be implemented, beside listening in and giving his opinion when Laura asked, Adrian didn't have much to do, so he focused on learning as much as he could. And now that he had an implant he would be able to spend his free time in the simulators, which were a bigger versions of the game he played, Fleet Commander. The entirety of the game was in fact the same as it was in real life, it was a simulation, though none of the players really knew that. From the game he learned most everything he needed to know about commanding a ship and a fleet. The game was made in such a way that winning the scenarios awarded points which the player then spent on first improving his ship, and later buying new ships, until he had enough to create a fleet of ships. The scenarios varied from simple transport missions, escort, and pirate hunting, to major fleet actions against other fleets or stations. There were many customization options, players are able to buy different components and implement them on their ships, or design new ones from available technology. Laura told Adrian that every piece of technology in the game was in fact within their capability to manufacture, and that they incorporated many ideas that the players had implemented in the game to real life application. The simulator that Adrian would now use was far more advanced than his simple datapad game. The simulator interacted with the users implant in order to create a believable virtual reality,

he would be able to walk through the ship inside the simulation, and command a ship from the bridge. There were also devices that enabled the users without implants to enter the simulation, but Adrian will not need to use them now. He was told that since there was never anything close to the kind of fleet they were trying to create, and as no one had any experience with commanding space ships, they would all be scored based on their achievements in the simulators, and after a certain period be given a rank in the new fleet and a position that best suited them based on the simulations. The simulations will include many different scenarios, some would put a person in command of a warship, other in command of a merchant vessel, some simulations would be entirely populated with computer generated people, other with other people who were running their own simulations, sometimes they would be put in teams where they would rotate on the ships posts and be scored on their performance on each. Adrian knew that the simulators would be coming online within next few days, and that the other recruits for the fleet would be arriving then as well, and also that he would be joining them. Laura told him that most of them will be at least five years older than him, and some more, they were recruiting from all graduates of Olympus, even from those that went to military school, and hoped to later go to the army. Adrian was a special case, being that he was raised by Olympus. He was the only one that was invited from the younger population of Olympus before he graduated from higher schooling, as the Fleet didn't accept applications, the recruits were invited to join, hell, most people didn't even know about the Fleet.

Adrian reached the meeting room and entered. The meeting already started, so Adrian made way towards his place at Laura's side and sat down.

"So, we are in agreement about the ranking systems?" Oswald Mein asked the room, before being recruited to fleet he was in charge of the cargo ships, and later in charge of the few military ships that Olympus had, Adrian found out that they even existed just recently.

There were nods and affirmative answers around the room. He then recited the new ranking system from his datapad.

"So, the person in charge of all our fleets, will be called Fleets Master. The ones in charge of specific fleet will be Fleet Commanders, though we don't have multiple fleets just yet." Oswald said with a smile, his comment produced a round of chuckles from the room. "Next are Task Force Leaders for groupings of ships smaller than fleets, which will be called Force Leaders, Next will be ship commanders, what would ordinarily be captains, they will be called Ship Masters, first officers will be High Primes, third officers Low Primes, next will come Chiefs whether they are medical chiefs,

engineering or others, all will hold the same rank. The next rank will be Adjutant, who is in charge of specific groups on the ships followed by Station Handlers, Navigation – Ship Handler, Communication Handler and so on. And then the crewmen, Cadets Tier 2 and Cadets Tier 1 being the lowest rankings in the fleet." He finished and looked at the room for any objections, it took them a couple of months to agree on every rank, some wanted to transfer the Navy ranks from the countries on Earth, other wanted army or even air force ranks, they spent many meetings arguing until finally Laura had enough and ordered new ranks invented. After no one spoke up, Oswald sat down. And Laura spoke.

"Thank you Oswald, now since we are agreed on this, and in the nick of time as the first recruits are almost here, we need to discuss the plans for our shipyards." She brought her datapad taped it a few times and brought the information she needed. It baffled Adrian why she didn't just bring the information on her implant, and then realized that she like most everyone in Olympus were much older, some even from the time before, when implants weren't common place, he deduced that it must have been habit.

"Alright, currently Olympus has three shipyards operational, with another one coming online in a month or so, orbiting Jupiter. Now, we have thirty seven ships given to us by Tomas, twenty cargo and transport ships, thirteen mining ships currently in the belt, and four warships also in the asteroid belt." She looked at around the table for a moment, taping her fingers on the table. "We have seven hundred recruits incoming, and not enough ships for them to use, of course they won't be allowed on the ships for at least three years while they go through the training, but it still leaves us with a task of deciding how many ships we build and for what purpose, that leaves us with thirty seven ships we already have, their crew will be rotating with our more promising recruits, and they will attend the fleet academy for at least a year, since they already have experience, some will stay on to teach a few classes before returning to their posts. But the new recruits will need new ships. Tomas gave us complete control over two of the shipyards to be used for the fleet. And he gave us green light to build a maximum of ten new warships. It seems that the League and Concordis have started construction on their own warships, they are of course keeping it a secret." She smirked, and the rest of the room chuckled. "In three years we can build twelve warships, or sixteen of any other class. Now bear in mind that Tomas plans to cut us off in four years from his supply lines, he wants us to be self-sufficient, meaning we will need to increase the number of our own mining ships, and cargo/supply ships. But until then we can rely on Olympus supplies. Any thoughts?"

The rest of the room then discussed pros and cons of various combinations, ranging from building all warships to all mining and cargo. The discussion continued until Oswald asked.

“Do we have any information on the Leagues and Concordis intentions?”

“Our sources tell us that they sold it to their leaders as a precaution, and that they have no intention of starting any conflict, though we did notice a slight increase in their military activity on the ground, but that doesn’t really impact anything in space.” Laura said.

Oswald nodded. “And how much do we know about their ships capabilities, how many are they building and how do they fare against ours?”

“We have acquired all of their designs. Their ships have heavier armor but are smaller, ours are hundred meters long, theirs around eighty, and theirs use rocket propulsion, while our tech in that regard is much superior, our variation on VASIMR drives gives us much greater speed, and our ships are better armed.” Laura sighed. “We didn’t put any of our more advanced weapons on the ships. Tomas didn’t see the need.” She said in way that clearly conveyed that she disagreed with that stance. “And also, he didn’t want to antagonize the Earth governments even more than we already have, in case that they found out about the ships. So we have basic kinetic weapons, railguns that fire metal slugs at the fractions of speed of light, they might be crude and hard to aim at moving targets but still very effective when they hit. And missiles. We also have small laser emitters used for clearing debris or anything else that might endanger the ship, but they are low power. The designs that we have acquired show that their ships will be armed with missiles only, though of a slightly greater payloads, and they will have a greater number of missiles on board. Concordis has started building two ships, while the League has three under construction. If everything goes right they will be operational within two years.”

The room discussed the information for the next two hours, until finally deciding that they would commission four additional warships bringing their “Security” force up to eight, three transports and three mining ships. After which they will build one additional warship per two years with the rest being mining and transport ships. The Olympus itself had more ships, which Tomas used to ship materials mined in the asteroid belt, and on the Moon and Mars. The one shipyard still under his command was dedicated to expanding Olympus mining and transport capabilities, the greatest problems they faced were with the transport of goods. Olympus operations in the belt produced more than they were able to ship back to the Moon, but Tomas still insisted that the operations keep working at 100%

capability, with the materials being stored on the mining sites waiting for transport. In fact Olympus produced much more than it used, and most of the excess materials were sold to countries on Earth. Probably one of the reasons why they didn't push harder to shut down Olympus. At least until they get their own mining operations up and running, but until now they were content to buy materials from Olympus, and expand their influence inside the Earth's orbit, their colonization attempts on the Moon have been small to date with just a few recon bases, and no settlements.

With the goal of the meeting accomplished Laura dismissed the room, Adrian stayed behind with Laura like he always did after a meeting. Laura usually discussed the meetings with Adrian, and asked him for his opinions on the topics.

"So, what do you think? Is it smart of us to increase our military capabilities in space?"

Adrian was familiar with most everything on the topics, learning things by attending the meetings, and basically shadowing Laura everywhere. He had no doubt that it was her intention, he realized quickly that he was being groomed for command, of what he still wasn't sure. He attended classified meetings with Laura, in his spare time he studied on technology that was used on Olympus ships, from military vessels to transport and cargo. He studied regulations, and continued with his martial arts training. He learned about command from watching Laura, and learned about the logistics of space colonization.

"Yes, we have a lot of assets in space already, much more than the Earth countries combined. Their plans to build military space ships in secret implies an agenda other than defense, but then again we did build ships capable of war in secret as well. But their intentions don't really matter, we need to be able to defend our assets in space much more than they do, our entire economy is based in space, since leaving Earth we have shut down, sold, or transferred most of our Earth enterprises to space. Any loss will impact us much more because of it." Adrian said, trying to use a more professional tone, like the one he often heard various Olympus personnel using when reporting to Laura.

Laura smiled and nodded.

"Yes, you are right, though Tomas still wants our military capabilities to remain a secret." She said.

She looked at Adrian for a moment and then asked. "Did the integration with your implant go well?" She asked.

"Yes, there were no problems." Adrian answered.

"And the AI?"

"There were no problems with her as well."

“Her?” Laura asked raising her eyebrow.

Adrian felt a blush coming over his face and answered quickly.

“She said she would prefer it if I referred to her as a female. I mean after she chose a female name.”

“You didn’t name the Ai yourself?” She asked surprised.

“Ah, well it didn’t seem right, I asked if she wanted to choose her own name and she said she did, I provided her with some of the books from my collection, and she chose a name from them. Then when I told her that the name is female she said that it didn’t really matter if it was male or female as she had no gender, but that if it made me feel better I could refer to her as a female.” He said in a single breath.

Laura looked at him approvingly. “Really? From the reports I read, all the Ai’s of this type were named by their users, and every male user gave his Ai a male name, and every female hers a female one. Hmm… you need to send the data from your implant to the research department, as soon as you can, they would be very interested in it. But let’s move on to other things. You will be attending the fleet academy soon with other recruits, I have no doubt that you will graduate with highest marks. But nevertheless I want you to focus solely on the classes. And of course you are not to speak anything of what you heard during our meetings, you have high clearance but your classmate will not.” She looked expectantly at Adrian until he said that he understood.

“Good. After you graduate we’ll see about the continuation of your career.” She narrowed her eyes at him and continued. “I have no doubt that you have already figured out that your educational path is different, and that we have other things in plan for you.” When he tried to feign surprise, she scowled at him. “Oh, wipe that expression of your face, I have no delusions about your intellect, I and my superiors know very well that you are unique. And as I said we have plans for you, but you do need to keep your focus and surmount all the obstacles we put before you.” Now there was no need for Adrian to feign surprise, as he was genuinely surprised. He assumed that he caught Laura’s eye and that she groomed him for a command position within the fleet, but knowing that even her superiors had taken notice, that scared him. As far as he knew Laura’s only superiors were Elias Bakas, who commanded the Olympus military, which in fact now made him the same rank as Laura, and then Tomas Klein himself. And the thought that Tomas Klein was interested in him was frightening. “Attending the academy will be one of those obstacles.” She continued seemingly unaware of Adrian’s thoughts. “The academy will put you amongst other recruits, most of who will be older than you. You will need to not only pass, but also make them recognize you as their equal. Your intellect has always put you ahead of those your own age,

but being intelligent is not the same thing as being smart. Now you will be in situation where everyone around you will have more experience than you. We are hoping to level the playing field for you a bit." She smirked. "Do you think you are up to the task?"

Adrian swallowed hard he looked at Laura and realized that even with his smarts he was still far behind those older than him, he thought himself smarter than anyone else, and even though he realized that they had plans for him, he still failed to see the scope of those plans.

"Yes." Adrian answered, but not really sure whether he truly was up to the task.

Laura looked at him, her eyes searching something in his, then she finally nodded

"Good." She then stood up and left the room, leaving Adrian alone with his thoughts.

Later that evening Adrian sat in his room thinking about his future. He still struggled with the notion that someone had plans for his future, he feared that his life would not be his own, that he would be limited by the path set before him, like when he was in the orphanage. But then again, this was an opportunity, he knew that everyone in Olympus was free to choose his own path, it was he who chose to go to the military, and then to go to the fleet when opportunity presented itself. He could have refused, and continued on to the military school. And he knew that he was given much more opportunities than anyone else. What he learned over his life in Olympus was that here, skill was valued over anything else, age and experience did factor in, but skill was paramount. That skill usually came with age and experience did make things different in Olympus, where most left school well past the age people on Earth did. And they could afford it, people lived longer now than in the past, and had more time to study and get experience before choosing what they wanted to do. Adrian was the exception, he was given the chance because of his intelligence. He had no doubt that he needed to confirm their trust in him, but he was also a bit scared to have them trust him that much. He kept thinking it over before finally deciding that he would continue to give his best, and hope that he lived up to the expectations they had of him. He lost himself in his thoughts until a soft female voice interrupted his mussing

"Adrian, may I ask you something?" the voice said.

For a moment he was startled and started looking around his room for the source of the voice, when he saw that there wasn't anyone there with him, he realized to whom the voice must belong to.

"Iris, is that you?" He asked.

"Of course. There is no one else present here." She said.

Adrian shook his head and grinned.

“I see that you synthesized a female voice for yourself.”

“Obviously.” She said. And Adrian swore he could feel a touch of amusement in her tone.

“I like it.” He said.

“Thank you.” She said, and now he was sure he heard pride in her tone.

“You wanted to ask me something?”

“Yes. I wanted to know if I could have access to the rest of your databases. I have already read through your book collection several times, I find that the material becomes less entertaining after fiftieth read through.” She said.

Adrian opened his mouth in shock. She already read through his collection fifty times? He realized that he shouldn’t have been surprised, she had much greater processing capability than him, and even though his own brain’s processing speed will increase over time as he became more compatible with his implants he will still not be able to match her pure computing abilities. He thought of ways to keep her occupied, and reached a decision.

“Ok, I’ll give you access to my databases, I can also give you limited surf access to the net, through my implant.”

“Great! Thank you Adrian.” She exclaimed happily.

Adrian set the permissions on his implant, and went to sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

January 2102 – two years later

Adrian stood at attention inside the receiving area on the combat-training base. He, alongside his ninety nine classmates had just arrived on the base, for the combat part of their training. The base itself was in space between Mars and the asteroid belt, and was massive, at least a couple kilometers long. They spent the last two years learning about Fleet operations, from how to pilot a ship, to how to fight it, they spent significant number of hours in the simulators, where they were put in teams and competed against each other, in fleet combat operations, or where they had to survive different kind of crisis that were reality of operating in space. After two years of classes and fleet training they had a week long testing period where they were evaluated on everything they learned during those two years. Those that passed were given a rank of Cadet Tier I, and then those who wanted to be in leadership positions, and had sufficiently high scores at the end, were sent to this base, where they would spend the next year training with army personnel. After finishing this year of combat training for those who wish to be in command positions, they will be given a chance to serve and command a real ship. It was decided that anyone who was part of the fleet command needed to have at least some military knowledge and expertise. No one really had any experience fighting in space, and wouldn't until a conflict appeared. But Olympus leaders wanted everyone to know how to fight, there were even some talks of installing a mandatory one year training for all members of Olympus. Their population was small, and since the only military they had was a former security, they had a need to expand their forces, having everyone go through at least a year of military training was one of the proposed solutions, effectively turning entire noncombatant Olympus population into militia. The biggest reason for the plan, was an alarming increase in military activity from Earth countries. Their "secret" warships finished, with more in construction, and a great push in technological research from Earth in weapons and space technology was alarming to Olympus. On the surface the relations between Earth and Olympus were good, they traded, and kept cordial communications, with Olympus providing some small aid to their colonization efforts. The plans for a mandatory military training were still secret, and Adrian was only privy to them because of his connections to Laura Reiss. He had grown close to her, with her becoming something of a mother figure to him, he spent his vacation days with her, and they kept in touch via messages and vid calls.

Adrian stood somewhere around the middle of the single line they formed on instructions from Platoon Leader Martinez. After they disembarked from transport, they were immediately instructed to form a line and wait at attention for the man in charge of the base to greet them. A minute later the doors on the far side of the receiving area opened and a man in dark green army uniform of Olympus stepped in followed by one other man with darker skin, almost pure black. As the man approached Adrian could discern the rank markings on his shoulders, there was a simple star with three shallow V bars bellow it marking him as a Force Commander, one of the higher ranks in the army. The army had changed its rankings from those most commonly used on Earth. The man besides him had a star, the same as the Force Commander and a one shallow V bar bellow, marking him as a Commander, a rank lower than that of a Force Commander. The men stopped a few steps in front of the line and both of them looked at Adrian and his classmates.

Force Commander cleared his throat and spoke in a clear carrying voice. “I welcome you to the army’s zero-gravity training base. I am Force Commander Nicholas Pierce, and I am in charge of this facility. You are the first ever class to come through this training base without being a part of the army, and as such you will be put through a yearlong crash course in the army operations. Our superiors thought it wise to have their fleet personnel sent here to be trained, until they bring their own programs up and running, and I completely agree, unlike some others.” As he said this he glanced at the man standing beside him. “You will have much to prove. I hope that you don’t disappoint. And as you probably already know passing this course is a requirement for graduating from fleet. I wish you all good luck.” With that he turned and left through the doors he came in through. The man who came with him remained and kept glaring at them. After a few moments he finally introduced himself.

“I am Commander Dayo Okoro, I will be in charge of your training. And I, unlike my commander do not agree about the decision to have you spacers trained in the army facilities. But since it is not my decision I can only try to make you into something that will be as small embarrassment to the Olympus army forces as possible.” There were some murmurs from Adrian’s classmates at his words and Commander immediately zeroed in on one of the cadets that Adrian recognized as Liam Thorne, a thirty year old former transport pilot, and stepped right up to him

“You think that you have what it takes to learn in a single year what our recruits struggle to learn in three years!?” He yelled at the cadet. Liam shrunk back at the Commanders booming voice that echoed throughout the bay.

He swallowed and looked straight at the Commander. “No.”

A scowl appeared on Commander’s face. “You will respond to all questions by a superior officer with a Yes, or No, Sir or Ma’am!” He yelled again. “And did I tell you, that you can look me in the eyes?!” His voice boomed. “Eyes forward!”

Liam quickly turned his gaze to the far side of the bay. Commander Okoro turned from Liam with a curse. “You lot aren’t even trained in simple army etiquette. How am I supposed to teach you worms anything.” He said. He turned to Platoon Leader Martinez. “Get this sorry bunch out of here and into their quarters.” Martinez saluted a fist to chest Okoro returned the salute and left the bay.

Platoon Leader Martinez turned to them and ushered them towards a side door and through the base, they walked for a few minutes before arriving at a big door that slid opened when they came close to it, they went inside and found that there were ten more rooms inside, all the doors were open and they could see a room with ten beds inside each room.

Martinez walked to the middle of the main room where a five big TV’s were placed in front of wide couches and a few tables, further inside of the main room there were billiard tables. Martinez gestured for them to gather around him and spoke.

“These will be your accommodations for the next year, your rooms have been chosen for you, bathrooms and shower rooms are down at the end of the room, women on the left and men on the right, your room number should arrive in your implant inboxes shortly, you will be placed in groups of ten, and you will act as a team in your training. Not all of you will go through the same training, and you will all either pass or fail together with your teammates.” There were again murmurs at that but Martinez forestalled them by raising his hand. “Inside your rooms you will find army uniforms that you are required to wear. Leave your cadet uniforms inside your lockers, you won’t be needing them here. You are free for the rest of the day, you are starting your training early tomorrow morning 06:00 base time. It’s now 18:13, you should set your implants to base time immediately, and go to bed early, you will need to be rested tomorrow.” With that he left them. Those few of Adrian’s classmates that didn’t have implants were given them prior to their arrival on the station. Adrian’s classmates didn’t know that he had one as well, he was too young and the implant he had was top secret and he wasn’t allowed to talk about it with those who didn’t have high enough clearance. So he brought his datapad out and found out his room number there. Adrian’s classmates immediately started talking with each other while some started separating into groups by their rooms. Most of them were familiar with each other from the fleet academy

and were at ease with each other. His room number was 9, which was the last room on right. When he entered the room he found that three of his new roommates were already there, he, of course knew them, like they knew him, there was Marcus Long, before coming to the Fleet Academy he was in the military school, though he was approached before he chose his path, Helen Morris who finished school as a simulation programmer, and Paul Isaacs the only one among the recruits who worked on Cloud station before being invited to attend fleet academy. But they were acquaintances at best. When he entered the room their conversation stopped, and they looked awkwardly at him, Adrian nodded respectively and went to the free bunk. There were two bunks on each side of the room with one at the end of the room, he took the bottom bunk of the second bunk on the right side of the room. He put his bag down and noticed that each bunk had a locker on each side, and a drawer beneath the bottom bunk on each side. Adrian took those on the left side, he put the contents of his bag inside the empty drawer, which wasn't much, and he had a few toiletries, spare garments and his datapad. He then opened the locker and found three sets of army uniforms and boots. The army uniforms followed the same pattern as the fleet ones, they were dark green with black outlines, while the fleet ones were black with dark blue outlines. And of course the insignia was different, the army had Olympus logo with a green star above it, while the fleet had the same Olympus logo only with a round field of stars.

Adrian then looked back at his roommates and saw that five more of them have arrived, the new arrivals were Noah MacKay who previously worked as a cargo and shipment manager on Earth, while playing Fleet Commander in his spare time. He wasn't the only one of the recruits that were invited because their success at the game. The other arrivals were Araki Sakura who finished the military school before the Academy. Alexander Mencken former med student invited

to the fleet after he expressed interest in becoming a doctor on one of the mining ships, next was Ana Trzin, 26 years old. Adrian had matured early, at sixteen he had already finished his height growth, and he was in better form than most other people, but his 18 year old face still held that boyish look, and anyone looking at him would know that he was much younger than his classmates. Ana had just finished Olympus College for space technologies at Sedna when she was approached to join fleet, she would most likely go for becoming a ships engineer which meant going through one more year of specialization back at the Academy after this course. Next was Tania Nast another pilot. Adrian considered joining them but found that he didn't really know what to say to them. When he first started classes at the Academy he was confident that he would make friends fast and make them accept him as their own, but he was only half successful. Oh they acknowledged him as their classmate, they small talked on breaks and lunch, they all respected his knowledge and skill, and everyone wanted him on their team during assignments or simulations. His teams tended to do better than the others, they followed his lead when he was in command, or at least most did, and then wanted him as a subordinate when they were in command. They asked him about things they didn't understand in class or to help them study. But socially they were distant. He wasn't invited to parties, or simply on a night out. He couldn't really say that he had friends. He accomplished what Laura wanted him to, he proved himself to them as a peer, but not as someone who they wanted to hang out with. During the past two years Adrian felt alone, he still emailed with Sahib regularly, and they were best friends still, but had grown a bit distant over the years, and Sahib was busy with his own training, and he had made new friends. Sahib tried to include Adrian in his new circle of friends, when he was on break, inviting him out with them, but they didn't really mesh, Sahib and his friends had formed bonds during their training, and Adrian just didn't fit in, he hoped that after this course he could feel at least bit closer to his best friend, having passed at least a fraction of what he went through.

Looking at his new roommates Adrian decided that this was his opportunity to bond with them and make friends, after all they will be stuck together for a year. He started towards them when he noticed another person entering the room. As soon as he recognized her he froze. The woman entering the room was Bethany Jones, the last person Adrian wanted to be around. She was 26 years old, she had red hair cut just above her jawline, green eyes, short pretty nose and a fit body that only came with years of physical activity, and had taken upon herself to refer to Adrian as "that kid". Before fleet she also finished military school and was planning to continue on to army. Her

father was ex Concordis military, and then later Olympus security and now Olympus army, her brother was in the Olympus army as well, and she was groomed for military life from early childhood. She was always the best, graduated top of her class, and was always the smartest person in the room. At least she was, until Adrian. She had finished as second in their class at the Academy, right behind Adrian. Their simulation battles were widely talked about amongst the students, Adrian had finished ahead with 23 wins, while Bethany had 16 wins, and they had 8 draws. Bethany was very competitive, and having never really met her match until Adrian, she didn't take to being second best very well. She insisted on calling him "kid", even though she wasn't all that much older than him, at least in Adrian's eyes. And Adrian simply didn't know how to respond, he tended to avoid her, and since she was popular that meant avoiding crowds.

Bethany entered the room greeted the rest and then started looking around for a free bunk, the only available bed was the one above his. As she looked around she finally noticed the free bunk, and then Adrian standing beside it. She looked back at their roommates.

"We're stuck with the kid?" She said. The rest of the room fell into an awkward silence, none of the others had ever called him kid in his presence, but he knew that even they referred to him as such when he wasn't around, he could see it in their eyes. How they averted their eyes when talking to him, how they went quiet when he entered a room. The only one that called him like that in his presence was Bethany. And just like that two years of being the little kid, even with everything he tried to make them see that he was just like them, two years of being alone, slowly losing his best friend, all of it was just too much, and something inside him snapped. Adrian walked right up to Bethany, she saw him coming and stood her ground as he approached. Adrian stopped right in front of her, he was so close that he could feel the heat of her body, he looked her in the eyes. Adrian was 186 cm tall and was just slightly taller than Bethany's 181 cm. He glared at her for a moment, she showed no outward appearance of being bothered by Adrian's closeness, but Adrian could see something in her eyes, he recognized surprise. She was surprised by his actions.

"I have spent the last two years putting up with your insults." Adrian said softly. Bethany tried to say something, but Adrian interrupted her. "No. Perhaps you didn't insult me directly, calling someone a kid isn't any kind of a grave insult, but your tone, your attitude, they left no doubt to your intentions. You wanted me to feel inadequate, to feel as if I didn't belong among you. And you did succeed, but no more, I have proven beyond any doubt that I do belong here. I was better than you, and I will not suffer you demeaning me anymore." Adrian finished hotly. The rest of the room

was silent, some had shameful expressions while others looked uncomfortable, Bethany had grown slightly red, she just stared at Adrian, not really letting herself believe what was happening. Adrian looked at her for a breath longer then stepped past her and exited the room, he entered the men's bathroom, through the door on the left he saw the showers and through the one on the right toilet cubicles, he entered one closed the door behind him, and sat down hard on the toilet seat. He put his head in his hands and released the breath he was holding since he exited the room.

"Well that was interesting." Adrian heard in his head.

"Yeah, I don't know what came over me." Adrian replied.

"At least you finally stood up for yourself." Iris said.

Adrian sighed, his brain and his implant had integrated fully in the past two years, and he no longer needed to vocalize his commands, nor did he need to speak out loud in order to speak with Iris.

"I didn't mean to blow up like that. It's just that everything piled up, and I just…"

"I know Adrian, and you really needed to tell them how you felt." Iris said.

"I could have found a better way, I acted exactly like a kid." Adrian said tiredly, and Iris didn't offer anything else. Adrian thought about going back there, and a feeling of dread filled him, they will never accept him now. He would spend a year living with strangers.

After a couple of minutes of gathering the nerve to go back out there he was interrupted by Iris

"Do you plan on hiding here forever?"

Adrian stood up and exited the cubicle, he exited the bathroom and entered the main room, some of his classmates were sitting on the couches, talking or watching the TV's, others played pool. Adrian went towards his room. When he entered he saw that there were only six of his roommates Paul, Helen, Sakura, Noah, Marcus and Alexander. Adrian went and sat on his bunk, he noticed that Bethany's bag was on the top bunk, he hoped that she would switch with someone, but it looked like he wasn't that lucky. A minute later Paul made his way to Adrian, he stopped in front of him and coughed uncomfortably, while Adrian just looked at him expectantly until he finally started talking. "Uh… Adrian, I just wanted to say that we, all of us," He gestured with his hands to the others. "are really sorry, about Bethany, I know that she is sorry as well, she didn't mean anything with it, she might have been a bit put out for graduating second but she didn't really mean it." He paused for a breath. "I-we just want you to know that we don't consider you a kid. It's just that, you are a bit hard to talk to. And well… we just wanted you to know

that." Paul said. Adrian looked at him bewildered. "It's alright." Adrian said. Paul smiled and went back to his bunk, Helen, Sakura and Alexander were laying on their own bunks, reading from their datapads, or plating games, while Noah and Marcus sat on the lower bed of their bunks and talked softly, Paul went to his bunk and laid down. Adrian sat on his own bad leaning on the pillow.

"Am I really hard to talk to?" Adrian asked Iris. He was the only one of his classmates that had an Ai with his implant, and he wasn't allowed to talk about it to anyone, only those older than 24 were supposed to have implants.

"I don't have any difficulties talking to you, but then I grew up with you." Iris said jokingly. *"But, you can be a bit intimidating to other humans."* She added.

"Intimidating? What? I'm always keeping to myself. I'm the farthest thing to intimidating there is." Adrian said.

He heard Iris sigh, over the years she had taken up many little habits and complexions that made her sound more human. *"Have you ever watched a recording of your simulation battles?"* Iris asked.

"No, why?" Adrian asked.

"You should, if you saw the way you are when you are in command it would be clear to you why they find you intimidating. When you are in command you shut off everything else, you don't let anything interfere with your mission, no emotion. You look rather impressive, and cold." Iris said.

Adrian thought back to the simulations, he knew that he could focus on the task at hand with exclusion of everything else, it was one of the things that made him good at learning. During the simulations he always tried to find the best possible path to accomplish his mission, he tried to emulate the way Laura looked when she was in command. He tried to mimic her presence.

"Well okay, I'm intimidating in the simulations, that doesn't explain why they kept their distance from me."

"Well… You do project this serious air around you, even when you are not in simulations." Iris said.

"What? I don't." Adrian said.

"Sorry, but yes you do."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner then?" He demanded.

"You never asked." Iris said. Adrian fumed at her, Iris had become very good at speaking and thinking like a human, but there were still moments when things just didn't make logical sense to her, things that she just failed to notice. Adrian sighed, there was no point in being angry at her, and it was his fault. Adrian was so entranced in his conversation with Iris that he didn't notice Bethany entering the room until she was standing just beside him. Startled he looked at her, she looked at Adrian and he could see several emotions pass over her face

too quickly for him to discern them.

"I'm sorry for before." She said and then quickly jumped up on the bed above him. Adrian was again struck stupid by the situation, Bethany had apologized to him, he had half convinced himself over past two years that she was a soulless bitch, and now she apologized. Adrian rubbed his eyes for the moment, and then he undressed and pulled the covers over himself.

"I guess that I will just need to try harder to make friends." He said to Iris, who remained silent.

Chapter Fifteen

A loud noise interrupted Adrian's sleep, he opened his eyes and stared into a pair of firm legs, as his eyes followed the legs upwards, they arrived at a shapely form wrapped in white underwear. A hand reached behind and adjusted one side of the underwear. Adrian's admiring was interrupted by an angry voice booming.

"You aren't dressed yet?! You have five minutes to get dressed and leave this room or I swear to all that I hold dear you will run the length of this base naked!" That brought Adrian back to reality, and he was immediately awake, he threw the covers off and stood up hitting his head on the upper bunk, he stood beside Bethany looking at the man that was yelling. Adrian had never before seen the man but he wore the army uniform with the rank insignia of a Squad Leader. Adrian and his roommates just stared at the man until he started yelling again.

"Didn't you hear me last time?! I said get your asses dressed and out of this room! You have four minutes! Move! Move! Move!"

With that everyone started moving at once, Adrian started moving left at the same moment Bethany moved right and they collided, Adrian looked at her and saw that she was dressed only in a white Sport Bra and panties, he flushed red and murmured. "Sorry." Bethany was looking at Adrian, and he realized that he was just in his boxers, he flushed even more, and turned, but he could swear he saw a tint of red on Bethany's cheeks before turning, he went around the bed to his Locker and started dressing in Army uniform. He was done dressing in three minutes and he went outside quickly followed by the rest of his roommates, the man was waiting for them outside and instructed them to stand in a line in front of their room, Adrian ended up standing with Bethany on his left and Sakura on his right. The rest of their classmates were likewise exiting their rooms. After everyone left their rooms and formed a line Platoon Leader Martinez who was standing in the middle of the main room looked around and said. "Eight minutes, that is just pathetic. Imagine if you were on a ship that was attacked. It would have taken you eight minutes just to get out of beds, not to mention getting to your stations! In eight minutes you could have all been dead!" he said. Everyone remained silent while P.L. Martinez glared around the room.

"I see that we need to teach you a lot more than I previously thought. From now on you will have two minutes after the alarm to get up, dress and form a line in front of your rooms, and for every minute you go over that time limit you will run an additional lap around the base. Now since we gave you a five minute time limit, and

you took eight, you will run thirteen laps around the base." He nodded to one of the Squad Leaders that stood by one of the rooms, each room had one Squad Leader.

"Alright! You heard the P.L. everyone move!"

The other Squad Leaders then ushered their recruits out of their dorm, and into the hallway. Each of the ten Squad Leaders led a team of ten, divided by their rooms, as they jogged down the empty hallways of the base. Adrian had Iris measure the amount of ground they covered, as no one told them how long a lap around the base was. After they finished the first lap Iris informed him that they had crossed roughly six hundred meters, meaning that with thirteen laps they will cross about 7.8 km. Adrian knew that at the pace they set he could easily finish it. He knew that those that finished military school could do it easily. Olympus has a strict physical exercise programs mandatory for all of their citizens. But Adrian also knew that army was much harder, and if they started their morning with an 8 km run, then it will only get harder from here on out. Adrian had been training for years, both privately and as a part of his martial arts training, he knew that he was on par with at least the army personnel. After they finished their run, some 40 minutes later, they were allowed to go to breakfast. They were again divided by their rooms, ten tables with ten recruits each. Trainers had started calling them recruits, even though all of them were Cadets. After breakfast, they were ushered into a big classroom, where they were drilled about army protocols and dangers of operating in space. They were in classrooms until lunch at 15:00, after lunch they were taken to an obstacle course were they were evaluated. The score board showed the scores of all the recruits, and Adrian finished the obstacle course with the highest score, the rest of his team were spread out in the first twenty places, with Bethany at the third place. After the course, they were taken to class about weapons, they were given rifles and shown how to safely use them and care for them, after that they ran another 8 km around the base, then they were sent to dinner, and sleep. After reflecting on the day Adrian wondered why the training was so easy, and his team wondered the same. The next morning they formed in front of their rooms in three minutes, so they had to run eleven laps. After the first lap Adrian noticed that the Squad Leaders increased the lap's length by going through different hallways. So they ended up running more than the previous day. After breakfast they were taken again to class, this time it lasted only two hours, and then they started physical training in earnest, they ran different obstacle courses which were all scored, they did pushups, crouches and chin-ups, everything they expected to do the first day. After lunch they went to weapons training, they were taught about all different kinds of ammunition,

and which were less dangerous to use aboard a space station or a ship. Afterwards they ran other obstacle courses in full gear. By the time dinner came most were exhausted. The next two months passed in a blur. They ran in the mornings, every few days the trainers increased their laps length, so they never ran less than the first day, even when they finally managed to form the lines in two minutes. The mornings they passed in purely physical and martial training. The afternoons were reserved for weapons trainings and team movements. After the first month they stopped running in full gear, after all they were fleet, not the army. But they would still have that knowledge if they ever needed it. The second month they spent by doing different scenarios were teams were put against each other and their performance scored. Scenarios varied from capture the flag, defending a "deck" from boarders before reinforcements arrived, infiltration, boarding actions, team hand combat, to speed courses. And Adrian had no choice but to reveal to his squad that he did have an implant, as most team communications were done through them. He got Laura's permission to tell them that he had a new experimental implant, and that the reason he didn't tell them before was because it was top secret, he also instructed them that they aren't allowed to tell anyone about it, he didn't mention Iris. The third month had them starting training in zero gravity. They were instructed how to move about without injuring themselves and others, how to operate weapons and fight in zero gravity. After a month of that, they were given more scenarios to participate in, these in zero gravity. By then Adrian had grown closer to his roommates, they had formed a bond and he now understood Sahib and his teammates bond. Though there was still some tension between Adrian and Bethany. They had become a sort of rivals, without really being close, they didn't have the same friendship that they had with the rest of the team. The atmosphere between teams was competitive, with each team wanting to be on the top. The scores from individual scenarios were added to that of the team ones, to form a final score for the team. There were even scenarios were a few teams had to work together. When the fifth month of their training started, it brought a lot of changes to their training. They were informed that there would not be a final exam, instead teams would pass if they had attained a high enough score. The problem was that they were not told what the passing score was, so every team had to work hard in order to increase their score. Also their training stopped. The trainers were still available for advice, and were overseeing their overall progress, but they were left to manage their own training, and more importantly chose the scenarios they wanted to improve. Trainers told them that every month a new scenarios would be available, and some decided to focus on attaining the highest scores in those new

scenarios, while others focused more on those they were already familiar with. By the end of the fifth month Adrian's team hadn't yet decided their path, and had focused on the individual challenges, but by the end of the month they had lost their first place on the board, and had started falling behind rapidly.

"We need to focus on team scenarios." Helen said during one of their team meetings after dinner.

"We are doing just fine with the individual challenges, our team members are at the top of every individual scoreboard." Marcus answered.

"It doesn't matter if we don't graduate, we are falling behind the others, and we are in fifth place now." Sakura said.

"We just need to do better, it will add up." Marcus retorted.

Helen sighed. "The individual challenges give less points than the team ones." She said.

No one said anything for a moment, each sitting on the floor in the middle of the room, mulling things over in their heads, they all knew that they had to change tactics if they were to retake their place at the top.

"We suck as a team." Paul said. No one said anything, they knew that he was right. Their teamwork lacked, they were able to get average scores in team challenges by relying on individual skills, the majority of their points came from individual challenges, at the time it was enough to give them the top spot, but when the others started improving their scores their team fell behind. The other teams had also each elected a team leader, while theirs hadn't.

Again no one said anything. After a few minutes Noah finally spoke.

"We need a team leader, someone to direct us in team challenges." He said.

"And how do we choose?" Alexander asked.

"We could vote." Paul said hesitantly.

"Not going to happen." Ana said. "Face it, we would vote for ourselves."

They all nodded, and then Adrian was struck with a thought.

"That was their plan." He said.

"What?" Bethany asked.

"Think about it, the other teams are all balanced, while ours is full with people who have great individual talent and are leaders. We don't work well when we need to listen to others." Adrian answered.

The rest of them all looked surprised that they didn't see it before.

"So what? They want us to fail?" Sakura said angrily.

"I don't think so. I believe they want us to learn to work together, and maybe to learn how to follow." Adrian said.

“So we got handicapped, and we are back at the start, we need to choose a leader amongst leaders.” Bethany said.

“Or not…” Adrian said a thought forming in his head.

“What are you thinking?” Bethany asked.

“Hm… I’m thinking that we were given a lot of freedom.” Adrian said.

“So?” Helen asked.

“So, the other teams, they choose leaders on their own, they weren’t told that they had to. The trainers only care about the scores, not how we get them.” Adrian paused.

“And that means what exactly.” Ana asked.

Adrian smiled as his idea finally fully formed. “We don’t choose one leader, we chose ten.” He said smiling.

The others looked at each other bewildered.

“Uh, Adrian, that is the problem we are having now.” Tania said.

“You misunderstood me. I don’t say we don’t change a thing, I say we literally choose ten leaders.”

“I’m not following.” Marcus said.

“I think that I am.” Bethany said a smile forming on her face.

Adrian turned to Bethany and asked. “In how many fields are scenarios divided?”

“Obstacle courses, combat actions, hand to hand, zero gravity and individual scenarios.” Bethany answered.

“So?” Marcus asked.

“We chose ten leaders, I get it now.” Sakura said.

Adrian smiled at her. “Yes, we divide the scenarios, ten leaders, each one of us gets to lead in the area he is the best in.” He said.

“That might work.” Tania asked.

“We would need to split our training time.” Sakura said, the rest of them eagerly joined in, their excitement rising. By the end of the hour they had split scenarios amongst themselves, Paul would lead during scenarios that included boarding actions. Helen would lead the obstacle courses in gravity, while Marcus would lead obstacle courses in zero gravity. Noah would lead them in their training for individual challenges, as he had the most top scores, while Sakura the station boarding courses. Alexander combat scenarios in zero g, Ana capture the flag courses, Tania hand to hand, and Adrian and Bethany would alternate in combat contests against other teams. They decided that rather than doing all scenarios at once, like the other teams were doing, they would focus on one area first and then moving on to the other, they divided their remaining time so that each team leader had enough time form strategies and so that they had time to get used to his leadership, they had also left some time close to the end of the twelfth month to come back and try to improve anything that they

thought they could. They spent the next three days training, without entering in any scenarios. The trainers came by their training area, each team had their own training area assigned to them, and asked why they didn't do any scenarios, and they just replied that they were training. On the fifth day of training Paul was finally confident enough in their teamwork and his strategy to enter one of the boarding scenarios, by then they had fallen down to seventh place. For their first try they chose one that had them boarding a disabled pirate vessel, with the goal to gain control over the ship, they chose that one because the others tended to avoid it as no one had actually managed to take control of the ship. The ship was a three hundred meters long cruiser, with a crew count of over eighty, most of whom were armed.

Team 9 (named after their room number, since they didn't decide on a name by the deadline the trainers chose the name for them) arrived at stations simulation center, and entered in the boarding scenario. After they were all "jacked in" they closed their eyes and suddenly they were on boarding shuttle, on their way to the pirate ship, they checked their weapons as they were taught to do, doing everything even though it was just a simulation, it felt real, and their trainers would evaluate their attempt and add or detract points accordingly.

"Alright, remember the plan, keep in constant contact, and let's do this!" Paul said over the comms, they were all wearing light assault armor, completely sealed off. The only thing anyone could see was a black armor, and a dark gray visor on the helmet, the only way to discern who was who, was by pinging their implant signature. They were off course in constant contact by implants and their visors had a HUD that showed a name above each of their head. Implant connection was of course simulated by the central computer, they were in fact connected to the simulator by their implants and weren't in direct contact with each other. That was also the reason Iris wasn't in the simulation with Adrian, the computer was simulating the standard implant. Iris could have accessed the simulator through Adrian's implant, but doing so would alert the staff of her presence, and that was still a secret. They suddenly heard a bang, and their shuttle shook as it was attached to the pirate vessels hull, they could hear the cutting mechanism opening their hull, and after a moment they saw a green light show above their heads, and a hissing noise that told them that the opening was pressurized. They stood up, and moved into a formation with Alexander in the lead and entered the ship. They had cut into the ship's cargo bay, there was no one here, after they all entered, they slowly moved towards the elevator, which led to command deck. The simulation program was smart, it adapted

to the players, and it never responded in the same manner, so the experiences that other teams had were of little use, except for one thing. They knew that the command deck was filled with pirates as other players decided to try and board closer to the command center, so they decided on a different tactic. All simulations had material that went with it, from mission objectives, to “rumors”, schematics and such. Paul had studied those schematics in great detail, and had come up with a plan that they all believed could work. There was some bickering about the execution until we were reminded by Helen that Paul was the leader for this scenario. After that they had quietly assented to his plan, not wanting to have to deal with others messing with the scenarios they will lead. The scenario had strict parameters, they couldn’t chose equipment that they carried, so their assets were limited. Each one of them had a standard N22 assault rifle, light assault armor equipped with a small oxygen tank that could provide up to three minutes of breading air, standard K17 side-arm pistol, not much kick but it was silent, a flash grenade, old tech but still effective for stunning hostiles, and a stun rod similar to that of the batons of Earths police, only these were shorter and could deliver enough shock to render the enemy unconscious for several hours. As they arrived at the elevator Sakura immediately opened its control panel and attached clamps on the main line that controlled that sent the commands to the elevator giving her access and control to the elevator systems. After a minute of hacking the panel through her datapad, she turned back to the rest of them.

“I’m in, I’m shutting down the cameras throughout the ship and no one is coming down through here, unless they drop down the shaft.” She said.

“Good, Sakura, Marcus, and Ana you stay here and make sure that if anyone tries that regrets it. The rest, move.” Paul said.

Alexander again took the lead, with the rest following in formation, weapons ready, they all knew the plan. Rather than taking the ships command center, they would take control of engineering. According to schematics there was a secondary command panel located there, if something happened to the command center, the control of the ship would go to the secondary panel. Their plan was to storm and take control of engineering, and take the control of the ship through there. The mission parameters stated that they needed to take control of the ship, and to eliminate the pirate threat. The Cargo bay had an access hatch leading to the upper deck, from there they had to pass through a hallway leading directly to engineering. They opened the hatch and started climbing the ladders one by one, the last one closed the hatch behind them, and Paul instructed Ana over the comms to seal the hatch from her side so that no one could get to the

hangar bay through there. When Alexander reached the end he sent a ready signal over their comms, once everyone responded affirmatively he reached to his belt and unhooked a flash grenade, he opened the hatch and threw it out, then quickly closed it. A moment later they heard it go off and he threw the hatch open and stepped out, immediately Adrian heard gunfire as the rest of his team followed Alex. Adrian was the forth in line after Helen and Tania. This was the riskiest part of their plan, because the moment one of them exited the hatch they would be vulnerable as there was no cover, they had no way of knowing how many hostiles would be in the hallway. Adrian finally exited the hatch, his implant feeding him information about enemy positions from his team mates that were already in the hallway, he immediately pointed his rifle down the hall from engineering as Alex, and Helen had already taken care of those on the other side. As soon as he aligned his rifle with a red dot on his HUD he fired taking a pirate in the head, Tania took the out the last one, leaving them with no immediate treat. Adrian moved forward taking a knee with his rifle pointed down the hall, while the rest of his teammates entered the hallway. Paul then instructed them to cover Helen as she opened the panel to the door that lead to engineering. They moved back closer to the door, with Paul kneeling on the right side of the hallway, his rifle pointed in the same direction as Adrian's and Alexander standing behind him, while Bethany stood behind Adrian. Noah and Tania were standing on opposite sides of the door ready to deal with anyone inside.

"I got it, ready?" Helen said a moment later.

Two pirates rounded the corner from the other side of the hallway as she waited for a response from Noah and Tania, Adrian and Bethany took care of them before they had the chance to respond.

"Ready" They said.

Helen taped the datapad in her hand and the door slid open. The moment they opened Tania and Noah were inside, with Paul instructing Beth, and Alex to follow, leaving him and Adrian to cover their entrance. Another three pirates came around the corner these shooting the moment they cleared the corner, but in their aim was poor, and Alex and Paul took them out a second later. As Noah gave the all clear, Paul told Adrian to move through the door with him covering him, Adrian stood up turned and ran the four meters to the door, where he took position inside concealed by the door and now covered Paul as he made the run inside. When he passed the threshold Adrian accessed the panel on the inside and closed the door. As Adrian turned around he saw seven pirates lying dead on the ground, and Helen working furiously on the panel in the middle of the room.

"There, I got control over life support." Helen said over the

comms.

Paul's plan was never to take control over the ship from the engineering, the drives, weapons, maneuvering, all those systems were behind powerful firewalls, by focusing only on one system they could take control over it much faster than if they tried to take control over everything. And by the time they did manage to take over everything the pirates would have reorganized and overwhelmed them with sheer numbers.

"Went the air from all compartments save this one and the cargo bay." That would take out any pirate not in the command center because the controls for the command centers life support were separate from those that controlled the rest of the ship.

Helen taped the screen a few times and several compartments started turning red. They waited a couple minutes making sure that enough time passed for those pirates unlucky enough to be outside of the command center to suffocate.

"Sakura, bring back the camera feeds." Paul said over the comms. A moment later Helen accessed the feeds and they looked at the various parts of the ship. Most every camera showed pirates lying on the ground dead or unconscious. Then she brought the feeds from the command center. There were 12 pirates left. 6 of them were working on panels trying to get back the control of life support, and two were yelling at them. The rest had positions around the room. It was strange seeing fear on the faces of what Adrian knew were simulations, programs. But they were made to be as life like as possible, their programing was adaptive. Though it was nowhere near the level of Iris, these simulations were only barley semi-sentient.

"Helen stay here and keep them from gaining back the control of their systems. Sakura, Marcus, Ana, reactivate the elevator and meet us at the C.C." With that Paul took the lead, they moved through the decks with pirates lying dead on the ground. Their tanks were good for three minutes of air, but Helen had already started pumping air back in. Two minutes later they arrived at the C.C. doors, Sakura, Marcus and Ana were already there waiting for them.

"They sealed themselves inside." Marcus said when the rest of them reached them.

"Helen can you open them on your side?" Paul asked.

"One minute." Helen replied over the comms.

Even though this was a simulation, everything was built to be real, even down to hacking, defense programs designed for their ships systems were used in the simulations. Aside from providing realism it was also a way to test and later improve them, as they could see weaknesses they didn't anticipated before actually testing them. And recruits had a tendency to find new and inventive ways of breaking

through the defenses.

The doors were wide enough for three of them to pass through them comfortably. Paul ordered them to take positions in front of the door, and a minute later Helen gave the go sign to Paul over the comms.

“Open the doors on three. One… Two… Three. Go!” Paul yelled.

The doors slid opened and the team rushed in, Alex and Paul led shooting, one going left the other right, Beth and Noah were next running through the middle to take cover at the panels in front of the door, while Ana and Marcus covered them from the doors, Adrian and Sakura entered next followed by Tania, The 6 pirates that were using the controls were hiding behind their panels, leaving 6 of the pirates for them to take out. One of the pirates managed to shoot Noah’s leg, the bullet hit the armor at the right angle to push through instead of deflecting. He went down, and Marcus immediately moved from the doors to cover him, while Sakura dragged him back behind a panel, Adrian got a clean shot at one of the pirates that he saw previously yelling at the operators, Alex and Paul had managed to move far enough into the round room so that they were in position to shoot at the pirates behind their cover. A minute later all 6 of the armed pirates were down, and Paul order the rest stunned and taken captive. After they had control of the room, they took control of the ship, finishing the scenario. A moment later they got a mission clear message in their implants inboxes, and the walls around them started exploding into blue particles and they were swallowed by darkness.

Chapter Sixteen

November 2102

Team 9 walked out with yet another top score in the capture the flag scenarios, this was actually the last capture the flag scenario and one that gave them a lot of difficulties during the past month. The scenario was set on a station, and the goal was to find and steal a memory drive (flag) and bring it back to the hangar bay for extraction. The scenario was known as one of the more difficult ones among the teams, as it required a lot of skill, teamwork and luck to actually beat. And then there was the matter of trainers scoring, they only gave a perfect score if there were no casualties, meaning that they needed to use only non-lethal weapons. It took Adrian and the rest of his team a better part of the month to finish the scenario with a perfect score, sacrificing the points they could have gotten by doing other scenarios, but it paid off in the end as the perfect score on this scenario gave a lot more points than the others. They walked to their room in a great mood.

"That was awesome, I really didn't think we could pull it off for a minute there." Tania said excitedly.

"Yeah, Noah pulled through at the end." Ana said slapping Noah on the back.

Noah just puffed up his chest and took in all the compliments from his teammates.

"Well, these points now push us to the second place. A few more and we will take over the top." Sakura said brightly.

The rest of the room agreed, and immediately their attentions went to planning on how to tackle the next month's challenges. The next month was actually the last, and the one in which they had to take as many top scores as they could if they were to take the first place. It was also the month that Bethany and Adrian were set to lead, they had agreed on doing the challenges one after the other, with Beth going first. But other than that they haven't managed to agree on anything else. They clashed on the training arrangements, on who would lead what scenario, they even clashed on who would go first, before the others intervened and they drew straws, with Beth winning. There was a lot of tension between them, and the rest of the team, all of them were aware that they needed victories if they were to take the top spot, they didn't know the amount of points that was needed to pass, so they aimed at being at the top, so the constant clashes between Beth and Adrian worried them. Things between Beth and Adrian were awkward at best, ever since her apology they tended to avoid each other when they weren't in company of other teammates,

there were no more pokes on the account of Adrian's age, but there was still tension, they just didn't know how to talk to one another, and Adrian felt like she had problem with him being there. They tried to be cordial with each other when in group, but they just didn't mesh when they were alone, choosing to ignore one another. Their teammates noticed this early on and always put them on different assignments during scenarios or tried to limit their contact. Their relationship was something of an elephant in the room that everyone knew was there, but no one commented on.

For the first challenge Beth chose a standard, team vs. team. A scenario where the goal was to "kill" the opposing team. They spent three days watching the videos of other teams fighting against each other, formulating different tactics for each one. The teams were paired by their trainers, and unlike other scenarios wining these didn't give a fixed amount of points, the trainers were the ones who decided how many points the winners would be awarded based on their performance. A few hours after they entered team vs. team queue they got a response informing them that they would fight against the team Viper, from room 4, currently ranked fifth overall, and fourth in team vs. team. Team 9 had a slight advantage over team Viper, as they hadn't entered a team versus match before, and therefore team Viper couldn't study their tactics. Adrian's team on the other hand studied records of Vipers matches in detail. They tended to use head on attacks. Matches versus other teams were different from the rest, they weren't held in simulators, but on physical terrain. There were many different arenas which were randomly chosen for each match. The one that was chosen for their match was, a forest setting. The arena was of course aboard the station. It was big at least five hundred meters in width and twice that in length. The terrain was dirt, brought from earth, with live trees, the celling simulated the sky. The armor they wore, or rather suit they wore was specially made, that looked like armor but in fact didn't offer any kind of protection against real weapons, it was designed to register hits from the weapons used in versus matches, which fired a small projectile made out of a thin layer of rubber that contained an electrical charge, upon impact the rubber ball shatters and the charge is released into the suit, the suit then send a charge into the wearers body which causes pain, the suit also locks up and based on the position of the impact the wearer losses the equivalent amount of mobility to the damage done, up to being completely frozen inside the suit. The weapons they carried looked like the N22 rifle.

After they put on the suits, making sure everything was properly secured, they signaled that they were ready and then waited for the match to begin.

A minute later the doors from the waiting room opened and they stepped inside the forest. This time they were in direct contact via their implants, and since this wasn't a simulation it meant that Iris was there with Adrian. Bethany immediately instructed them to separate into three teams of three with Adrian left as a rear guard. They moved in a V formation with Bethany's team being the center and behind, their tactics were to encircle the opposing team and take them out, which left Adrian with nothing to do as he was far behind them. He made the point when Bethany told them the plan, which she of course rejected as nonsense, he was to protect their rear, no matter that with their wide formation there was no way anyone could get behind them. But Adrian finally conceded not wanting to fight with her. The rest of his team advanced quickly and soon were out of his sight, he could still follow via his implant. Adrian moved slowly following Bethany's instructions to the letter, keeping a 200 meters gap between the rest of the team and himself.

"The two of you need to work this thing out." Iris told him.

"What thing?" Adrian asked her, playing ignorant.

"Don't be like that with me Adrian. I know you." She said.

"Fine, what would you have me do?"

He heard a sigh. *"Talk with her, find out what is the problem, both of you are only hurting the team with your feud."*

Adrian elected to keep silent and focused on moving through the tick forest. He knew she was right, but he just didn't know how to approach Bethany, nor how to make things right between them, he wasn't blind, he knew that she had some problem with him, he just didn't know how to deal with it.

A rapid exchange of fire startled Adrian, and he took cover, he focused on his HUD. The rest of the team had meet with the Vipers, there were more sounds of fire, and he could hear Bethany instructing the team to fall back, but a few moments later she and the rest of the team grew silent. Their blue dots on his HUD changed into red ones, indicating that they were down. Adrian looked out of his cover. He didn't see anyone, but he knew that the enemy team was approaching, by now they would have realized that they were one enemy short. Adrian looked at his options, he could just walk out and let them shoot him, since their team had already lost. But he didn't want to just give them this win, he remembered Bethany, and suddenly he didn't want to be defeated without a fight. He quickly turned back and went to a tree he noticed a few meters back and he climbed it. He found a spot four meters from the ground and trained his rifle to in the direction the other team was most likely to come from, he didn't have a lot of visibility, only a couple of meters in front of the tree, but that also benefited him, they wouldn't spot him easily. The Olympus rifles,

unlike the ones from Earth didn't have scopes, they relied on their wielders implants to aim. When the rifles line of fire aligned with a target the crosshair on the HUD would rotate, at least that was what it did for Adrian, the HUD was fully customizable.

A few moments later the first enemy came into view, Adrian followed him with his sight but didn't fire, he waited a few moments more until two more arrived. When no one else arrived, he aimed his rifle at the last one in their formation, and took him out with a well-placed shot in the chest, immediately he moved his rifle to the next closest and took him out as well, it all happened in less than a second and he then moved to fire at the last one, which had already started moving towards cover, Adrian's first shot missed, but his second struck him in the lower back. He fell on the ground, and turned firing his rifle blindly, and Adrian finished him with a shot to the chest. He then jumped down from his hiding spot and started running back towards his team starting point.

His retreat was unfortunately interrupted by someone opening fire on his back, the first shot missed but the next hit him in the leg, and he went down, he rolled over and tried to aim in the general direction of his attacker but another shot found his right shoulder, and pain spread through his arm, the suit freezing its movement, a moment later another shot found his chest and he was completely frozen in his suit.

"Match over. Team Viper victory." A voice rang out inside the arena, a minute later Adrian's suit unfroze. He got back on his feet and went back to the changing room.

He was first to arrive as he was the closest to their changing room, a minute later the others started to arrive, Adrian was already out of his suit and was sitting on one of the benches when others entered. They removed their helmets, and Adrian noticed their somber expressions, they were all accustomed to wining, they took the top scores in other challenges and believed that team vs. team would be no different. They took off their suits, changed into their regular uniforms and started leaving the room to go back to their team room. When Bethany started for the doors Adrian got up and grabbed her hand. She turned angrily to him and started to say something but the look on Adrian's face stopped her. The rest of had left the room with Noah being the last, he noticed them staying back.

"Adrian? You com—" He started before Adrian interrupted him by closing the door. He took a deep breath and turned towards Bethany who stood in the center of the room, her hands crossed over her chest.

"What is your problem?" Adrian asked, trying to keep his voice controlled.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. It was a good plan, they ju—”

“I’m not talking about the stupid match!” Adrian yelled interrupting her, he started to get agitated, his breathing picking up speed, he managed to bring himself under control in the silence that followed his outburst. When he had enough control he meet Bethany’s startled eyes and stepped closer to her.

“I’m talking about this thing you have against me.” He said.

She opened her mouth then closed it.

“I have nothing against you.” She said slowly.

“Don’t. We both know that there is something, this feud between us is only hurting our team, and our chances at graduating. So why don’t you just tell me what it is, and maybe we can try to work it out.” Adrian said.

Bethany just looked at Adrian silently, but he could see her holding back something.

“Bethany. Please, just tell me. I have spent days trying to remember if had ever done something to make you dislike me.” Adrian said pleadingly, he was growing tired of the tension between them.

Bethany’s face scrounged up in grimace.

“It’s nothing you have done. It’s me.” She said angrily. Adrian was taken aback with the vehemence of her response.

“What do you mean it’s you?” He asked confused.

Bethany sighed, the anger going out of her, she sat down on one of the benches.

“I was jealous, at first, and I hated you. You must understand, I have trained and studied for this my whole life. I always wanted to be a soldier, since I was a small girl, I would look at my father and later my brother, they were my heroes, and I wanted to be just like them.” She said, Adrian knew that both her father and her brother were in Olympus military. “I would train day in and day out for the single purpose of being the best, I wanted to make my family proud. After I graduated elementary I went to the military school. And there all my hard work paid off, I was the best, and my training led to me being invited to join the fleet, something that was new, were I could leave my own mark. I was so proud of myself, as were my father and brother, I learned that only the best were invited to join the fleet, and everyone else I met was the elite, and I was the best even among them. And then I met you, an 18 year old kid. Someone who was so good that they recruited you before you even went to specialization school. At first I thought that you were being favored, but quickly I realized that you were just that good. So I made it my mission to be better. But then I realized that I wasn’t better, so I tried to alienate

you from the others, I didn't even realize what I was doing, it all just happened. And then when we came here, and you told me off, it was like a fog lifted of my mind and I saw how I treated you." She said with a sad look on her face. "Then I hated myself, I tried to apologize, but didn't feel like it was enough. I was embarrassed and didn't know how to talk to you after that, I was uncomfortable around you, and I didn't want to lose my pride, so I tried to limit our interactions, it just became easier than talking to you." She finished softly. Adrian looked at the ceiling. *"How much easier this all would have been if we only talked to one another."*

"That is one thing I will never understand about humans, how can beings so reliant on communications with others of their kind, be so deaf and ignorant of one another." Iris said.

"I don't know."

"What?" Bethany said softly. Adrian looked at her and realized that he answered Iris out loud. He went on his knees in front of Bethany and took one of her hands in both of his. He smiled awkwardly.

"We are such idiots, you and I." He said.

Bethany looked at him funny but didn't respond.

"If only we talked sooner we could have put this behind us a long time ago. There is no need for you to feel inferior to me, or to be embarrassed, it was my fault as well, I was too scared to talk to others at the Academy, I didn't even know how. I am not like you and the others, my age isolated me from the rest of you. And I didn't make any attempt to bridge the gap between us." Adrian said.

Finally, she released a nervous laugh. "Yes, we certainly are alike in that manner." Bethany said.

"You don't need to avoid me, or to blame yourself for what happened before." Adrian said, he smiled and stood up, he still held Bethany's hand, so he pulled her to her feet. Adrian looked her in the eyes and said.

"Are we good now?" Adrian asked.

Bethany let out a relived sigh and nodded. "And I am truly sorry for the way I treated you in the Academy."

"It's forgotten." Adrian said.

"Thank you." She said relived.

They shared another moment, and then Adrian started towards their room with Bethany walking beside him. When they entered the room their teammates looked at them and released a collective sigh of relief. Bethany and Adrian looked at each other, then at them, and said simultaneously.

"What?"

They all looked at each other and Sakura responded.

“We thought that you killed each other.” She said dead pan serious, Adrian tried to keep his face straight and not reveal his amusement, which was fuelled even more by the fact that they could have killed each other. He kept a straight face and put a hand on Bethany’s lower back pulling her closer to him.

“Why would we kill each other? We are best buds.” He said in a bewildered voice.

Bethany caught on to his ploy, and put left hand on his shoulder, then she turned and leaned into Adrian putting her right on his chest.

“Yes, why would we kill each other?” She said softly. The startled looks on their teammates’ faces were too much for Bethany and Adrian and they burst out laughing. Adrian laughed so hard that he had to lean on the wall holding his stomach with his hands, and Bethany wasn’t much better off, she was laughing so hard her eyes started to tear up. The rest of the room joined them after a moment of stunned silence.

After they managed to get themselves under control Tania looked at Bethany and Adrian.

“You two almost had me there, for a moment I thought that all that tension between you was an act. So what happened?” Tania asked.

“We worked some stuff out.” Bethany said.

“Well I am happy that you finally straightened things out, but we still lost the match.” Alexander said.

“Yes.” Bethany said somber, it was her tactics that led to their defeat.

“The tactic was solid.” Adrian said, getting the attention of everyone in the room. “It’s just that we forgot something.”

“What?” Sakura asked.

Adrian looked over the others, making a brief eye contact with Bethany.

“The other teams had been fighting amongst themselves in these matches from the beginning, while we chose to focus on only one type at the time. They have much more experience, and if we want to beat them, we will need to improve quickly, and change our game.”

Part Three – The Divide

Chapter Seventeen

January 2103

Tomas Klein sat in his new Office aboard the Mars station, he had moved his headquarters from Cloud station in Earth's orbit to Mars, as it was becoming increasingly more difficult to hide his moves in the vicinity of Earth, ever since the Earth's major players started increasing their presence on the Moon. About half of Olympus population was living on the Moon, mostly families, the other half was spread out on Mars, and on the stations they had inside the system, they had very little people living on the Earth, besides those who worked there, Tomas had slowly transferred all of his people to space, leaving the underwater cities to Concordis, all save for Sedna. He still had some employees working on Earth but their families now lived in space. Earth economy was still dependent on things that Olympus produced, he tried to lessen that somewhat by giving them some of their facilities, it was still not enough, he had hoped that the countries of Earth would unite and start exploiting the resources of the Solar system, but they were unwilling, content to leech of Olympus, while expanding their military influence in space, that was one of the reasons why he didn't share Olympus tech with them, they were not ready yet. Tomas managed to keep most of his actions secret from the Earth governments, he kept the true number of his ships under wraps, and Earth believed that he had somewhere around 20 transport and mining ships, but they weren't sure, as Tomas kept moving them outside of their area of influence. In truth Olympus had around a 100 ships, most delegated to work inside the asteroid belt, not counting several stations, two in deep space outside of any planets orbit, and four shipyards/space stations that were spread out in the solar system. The secret to their rapid expansion and unprecedented building capabilities was the fabricator technology. With it they managed increase their manufacturing speeds by more than 500%, while the powers of Earth still relied on manual labor, and their industrial assembling lines. Tomas knew that the word of his fabricator technology got out and that Earth knew about it, but they had no way of getting it. Tomas kept the technology heavily guarded, and had moved all his fabricators outside of Earth influence. Tomas has kept a lot of Olympus technology out of the hands of Earth governments, and while he wanted to see all of humanity advance together, he knew that the governments of Earth wouldn't allow it, any technology they acquired was tightly controlled and used for their individual progress, rather than the progress and improvement of everyone's lives. They were still too set in the old rivalries, still remembered old wars, and

while they did make progress, The League and Concordis being a part of it, it was still not enough. He knew that there was still corruption, and an enormous gap between those in power and those bellow them. So Tomas kept it all out of their hands, some could say that he was doing the same thing those on Earth would, but Olympus wasn't like them, there was no division by class in Olympus, everyone was equal in opportunity. Everyone was able to choose their own path, all for free, the only thing Tomas asked in return was that they use their freedom to better the lives of those in Olympus. So while on the surface it seemed that Tomas was doing the exact same thing the corrupt politicians of Earth would do, the difference was in motivation, they would do it for their greed, while Tomas for the good of all. He hoped that he would live long enough to see the day when Earth finally unites under one banner, he didn't need it to be him, anyone worthy would do. Tomas only feared that it would never happen. He looked at the report that floated above his table. The report held the latest news regarding the Concordis, Coalition, and Leagues warships, for the past few years they were building warships, and increasing their shipbuilding capabilities with more construction post in Earth's orbit. His shipyards were now orbiting Jupiter, with only one orbiting Mars. Olympus also now had 8 warships, they didn't have a need for any more, even the decision to build those ships was badly received by his advisors, and were only built because Tomas feared that Earth would turn to force to acquire Olympus tech. Now his fears didn't feel at all foolish. Concordis had 3 warships, currently in orbit above Europe, League had 4 orbiting above Australia, and the Coalition had just finished building their second ship, with more planed, there was no need for them to have warships, there was no threat to their territory from space, unless they knew about Olympus ships, which was unlikely, as they never went anywhere near Earth. There were of course tensions between the three Earth powers like there always were, so Tomas assumed that they wanted to have their space interest covered. Both the League and Concordis had built colonies on the moon in the last year, they were small by Olympus standard, but monumental for those involved. But overall their space operations paled in comparison to Olympus, not just in technology but also in scope, all three combined barely had half the number of ships that Olympus had. They had limited mining operations on the moon, and none in the belt. They relied on Olympus for raw materials, which Tomas gladly provided, he didn't want to impair their progress no matter what it looked like to them, he wanted them to catch up to Olympus, to became Olympus's equals.

Tomas sighed and closed down the report, there was nothing he could do about them arming themselves, that was one of the reasons

why he didn't want to share their technology with them, he knew what they would do with it. He opened up the next report, this one from Professor Hyeon Seo-yun. It informed him that their first interstellar trip was a success, the exploration ship Star Gazer has arrived from its trip to the Alpha Centauri system, the system closest to us. It started its journey more than a year ago, with their version of the alien hyperdrive they were able to travel at ten times the speed of light, making the 4.3 light years trip in just over five months, they spent another month there collecting data and looking around the system and then spent another five months back, it's now traveling at sub light speed from the edge of our solar system, the edge being the place where Sun's influence was low enough for a ship to enter hyperspace, which was a few light hours past Pluto, it will take it a few months more to travel back to Mars. The drives worked perfectly even on a trip that long, as did the stasis pods the crew used while in hyperspace, just as Seo-yun assured him they will, but Tomas was still a bit skeptical, he wanted to wait a bit more before they undertook such a long trip, but Seo-yun insisted that there was no need, that they understood the technology and had everything under control, Tomas chose to defer to her judgment and gave her the permission. The report contained a mountain of scientific information that Tomas didn't understand, sensor readings, readings from the planet orbiting one of the suns in the system and others, he scrolled down until he found Seo-yun's translation of the data, she tended to leave Tomas notes on the more scientific reports she sent him, he insisted that he get any report on matters she deemed important. Her notes told him that while this was a giant leap and a momentous event in human history, the system itself wasn't impressive, there was nothing there of interest to them, the one planet was unremarkable, nothing more than a rock, with no or very little materials that they used, she didn't recommend colonization of that system. There were talks between Tomas and his "council" on colonization of other star systems, they all agreed that if they started colonization they would start with a planet with more hospitable conditions, preferably an Earth like world, but based on the map recovered from the Alien ship, those planets were so far away that it would take them decades to get there from the Solar system. For now they would stay in their birth system.

Just as he finished the report, his second, Nadia pinged him and informed him that Seo-yun wanted to speak to him, he told her to send her in.

A moment later Seo-yun walked in, she had her hair tied in a knot on top of her head, and was holding a datapad in her hand, it was amusing to Tomas how most of those who were born before the age of implants had tendency to review information on their datapads rather

than their implants.

“Hello Seo-yun, I have just finished reading your report on the Alpha Centauri mission.” Tomas said.

“Hi, well, I have something even more exciting to show you now.” She sat down on the chair in front of his desk, they had abandoned any formality between them a long time ago. She smiled brightly, with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Tomas raised an eyebrow. “More monumental than a trip to another star system?”

“Oh yes, much more.” She said.

Intrigued, Tomas motioned for her to continue.

“I have two things to tell you, I waited until we were sure about both of them, it was coincidence that the final test results came within a day of each other.” She said. Tomas knew that Seo-yun had a lot of experiments going on, and that she didn’t bring them to him until they were successful. He kept silent and waited for her to tell him more.

“First, we have been experimenting on faster than light communications, there were some mentions of it in the alien databases, but the data was too corrupted to be recovered, but it helped us by telling us that FTL comms were possible. So we threw ourselves on the problem. First idea we had was to use hyperspace capable comm drones, but since ships or in this case drones can only enter hyperspace when they were sufficiently away from a star’s influence we rejected it, but kept it as a possibility for communication between star systems. Then we got the idea to use gravity. We had discovered that gravity propagates at the speed substantially faster than the speed of light, when we were developing artificial gravity generators. But our understanding of gravity is not yet large enough to pull it off efficiently, we don’t have a power source strong enough to create a gravity pulse focused and strong enough to reach any distance that would be of use to us. So after these failures we tried to follow more abstract and unconventional paths. We tried speeding up the light, at which we of course failed.” She grinned. “We played with the concept of micro wormholes, but decided that at our current level we weren’t proficient enough to pull that off safely, if at all. And then we went back to hyperspace, we know that the law in hyperspace are different than in regular space. We studied the laws of hyperspace and finally discerned that the reason ships can only enter hyperspace when the stars influence was low enough has to do with the mass of the object trying to enter the space. After an object with mass passes certain point of gravitation pull on it, it can safely pass through the barrier between regular space and hyperspace, if it tried to enter hyperspace while the gravitation pull on it was above that point, the gravity would hamper it, and it wouldn’t achieve, for the lack of a

better word enough “thrust” to be pushed through the barrier, resulting in it being destroyed. Theoretically one could enter hyperspace within a star system, but it would require insane amount of energy, the closer to the sun you are the more energy you would need, while after it crosses the “passing point” the amount of energy drops off sharply. So after we learned this we set on to find a way to pass communications through hyperspace. We discovered that if we send a charged luxon particles, particles that move at the speed of light, into hyperspace they became tachyons, particles that move faster than the speed of light, and move in the direction they were moving prior to entering hyperspace until they run out of charge. So we devised a way to send information with these particles, we devised computers that can interpret the information once tachyons leave hyperspace and become luxon particles again. So now we have FTL or rather near instantaneous communications, the lag is so small that it is negligible, with a few little problems, one is that the communications are instantaneous in the range of 50 light years, after that the tachyons lose speed rapidly, even if they are still charged, but it will still be much faster communication than anything else. The lag increases substantially after 50 ly point. But we won’t need to worry about that for a long time, we even have some ideas that could effectively remove the problems, we could place rerouting stations that would receive the communication and then relay it for another 50 ly, if we ever need to communicate over such vast distances. The other problem are the calculations required to send the communication on target, the math is abysmal, the biggest problem is that space, our galaxy even is in constant motion, while hyperspace is not, and as such we need to calculate the amount of charge the communication needs, then the coordinates of the receiver, as they will be after the communication exits hyperspace. The only computers that are able to calculate this are our most advanced quantum computers, and only those that have an Ai in them, the Ai’s ability to manage multitude of problems simultaneously lowers the margin of error to barley 0.001%”

Tomas raised his hand. “Wait. Why can’t a quantum computer do the calculations without the Ai?” He said.

Seo-yun grimaced. “It can, but an ordinary software can’t do it as precise as an Ai can. The Ai’s have the ability to coordinate and use quantum computer’s assets in such a way to increase its capabilities by a factor of 12. We have still not been able to figure out why.” She said. Tomas saw that their inability to find the cause of the increase in ability was annoying her. She had never liked unsolved puzzles, it was one of the reasons he hired her, and showed her the alien ship so many years ago.

Tomas sighed. “Alright, I know that you feel that the Ai pose no threat, if they are treated right, but I still want you to be careful. The aliens shackled their Ai’s for a reason, and I don’t want us to make any mistakes.” He said while looking Seo-yun in the eyes. She held his glare, and was about to say something when she changed her mind and nodded.

“Good, that is an amazing discovery, and I have no doubt that it will be remembered in the history books, but you said you have one more thing to tell me. I doubt that it could be more amazing than what I just heard” Tomas said.

Seo-yun’s expression immediately changed from serious to amused, which immediately told Tomas that he was wrong, this will be even more amazing.

“I so enjoy to prove you wrong.” Seo-yun said while smiling and batting her eyelashes at him, which in turn made him smile with her.

“Go on then, prove me wrong.” Tomas said.

“Well, you know that we got a lot of medical knowledge from the alien ship.” She said, and Tomas nodded. “Well, the knowledge itself was worthless to us, as it was all about alien physiology, so it was of low importance, but one of our geneticist was looking through it in his spare time, and something he saw in there, on one of the races that the Union encountered gave him an idea. So he worked on it in his spare time for the past few years, until finally a year ago he had a breakthrough. He went to his team leader and showed her his work, and she in turn showed it to me. I gave her the permission to focus all our available resources on it, and then we had another breakthrough a few months ago. The final test results came in yesterday, so now it is confirmed. We have been able to create an artificial gene, that when introduced into human DNA, causes our cells to stop decaying, stop dying, in other words it stops entropy. With this gene we can remove death. Each one of us with this gene, will live forever, barring that we don’t have a violent death or die from disease.” Seo-yun said grinning.

Tomas looked at her with mouth and eyes wide open disbelieving what he heard, he thought that she must be pulling his leg, but he knew her better than that, she never joked with her work. Living forever, he tried to wrap his head around the concept, it was unbelievable.

“That, that… That is insane.” He finally said.

“Yes it is.” Seo-yun said still smiling.

“My god, what are we going to do?” Tomas asked uneasily.

“What do you mean?”

“This could change everything.”

Seo-yun’s smile slipped at the expression on Tomas’s face.

“How?” Seo-yun asked.

“This could change everything it means to be human. Imagine what it would do to religion, or how it will influence people lives. Or what it would do to Earth if we give this to them. The Earth is already overpopulated, if people stop dying… It could lead to the collapse of our entire race at the worst, at best it will redefine the human existence.” Tomas said gravely.

Seo-yun looked at Tomas, understanding dawning in her eyes.

“We will need to be very careful about how we introduce this.” Tomas said.

Seo-yun started to protest but he cut her off.

“I’m not saying that we don’t share it, I just think that we need to be aware that this will impact our entire race, and before we introduce this kind of an upheaval to our culture, our way of life, we must be ready to face the consequences.” Tomas said.

“You are right.” Seo-yun said, and knew that with this one discovery, more than any other before, Olympus will yet again change the world.

Chapter Eighteen

February 2103

Adrian and his teammates waited inside of the training base's landing bay for the transport ship to dock. Their team had passed the training, after that first stumble Bethany and Adrian managed to clear the air between them and started to work together on tactics for the team battles, instead of leading alternatingly, they led together. It proved to be the right choice, after that first loss they had won every other match, bringing their team to the top spot. After the deadline, Force Commander Pierce informed them that only the top three teams passed, and the third one just barley. The other teams were crestfallen, but the Force Commander informed them that they could stay one more year and try to pass with the next class, that they could keep their ranks of cadet tier 1 and join the fleet at that level, or chose another path in the fleet, they always needed people. Some stayed behind, while others chose to remain cadets, and try to work their way up the ranks through service. From those that passed, only team 9 was told to board the transport that would take them to their new assignment, they weren't told yet what ranks they acquired by passing the test. The other two teams were told that they would remain on the base for another week. Team 9 had little time to celebrate, they spent only a few hours at the stations bar, and then they had to go to sleep, in order to wake up and be on time to board the transport tomorrow morning. They didn't even know where they were going.

After the ship docked and they boarded it, they were told that the ship was going to the Mars station where they would be told their assignments and ranks. One of the transport ship's crew showed them to their quarters for the trip. They spent the next month on the ship as it traveled from the training station to the Moon. They spent their time mostly in the recreational facilities that the transport had, and the rest inside of their room discussing what their next assignment would be. Most of them wanted to be placed on a transport or a cargo ship, with all of them agreeing that a post on a mining ship would be the least favorable. Adrian on the other hand believed that there was a good chance that they would be posted to serve on one of the Olympus's warships, but the others didn't even know that those existed, and Adrian couldn't tell them. So he agreed with them.

After they arrived at the Moon station, they were immediately met by a woman in fleet uniform, with the rank of Adjutant who sent them instructions on where they needed to check in. They were split, with most were sent to the offices in charge of transport ships, save Alexander who was sent to the medical, and Adrian and Bethany who

were only given the instructions on how to get to the office where they were supposed to check in. They said their goodbyes and agreed to meet later that day.

"I wonder why we weren't sent with the others. It doesn't even say where we are going, just the instructions on how to get there. I hope they don't plan on assigning us to a mining ship." She said. Adrian didn't need to wonder, he knew exactly where they were going, he went there often when he was on a break from the Academy and had the time for the trip to the base orbiting the Moon.

"We are going to the Laura Reiss's office." Adrian said.

"And how do you know that?" Bethany asked frowning.

"I was there before." Adrian said.

Bethany stared at him, but when he didn't elaborate she gave up and they walked the rest of the way in silence.

When they arrived, the secretary in front of the office instructed them to go in. Adrian entered the office with Bethany following close behind. The office was the same as it had always been. Laura sat behind her desk reading reports. Or rather Fleets Master Laura Reiss, Adrian corrected himself, he couldn't keep referring to her as he usually did, at least not in public. When she noticed them she stood up and walked around the table to stand in front of them. Both Bethany and Adrian stood at attention, Laura studied them for a moment, and then reached out and hugged Adrian, surprising him. A moment later she let him go, without him even having the chance to return the gesture.

"Congratulations on passing Adrian." She said smiling brightly. Adrian looked at her and couldn't help but smile as well. Laura was the closest thing to a mother he ever had, and even though he had forgone the possibility of being adopted when he accepted to come to Olympus, he felt as if she was his family, and even without her last name he felt a close bond with her.

"Thank you." Adrian said, and then he remembered Bethany, he glanced at her and saw that she had a startled and confused look on her face. She of course didn't know about his connection to Laura.

Adrian coughed uncomfortably and looked back at Laura, she looked at Bethany and her face reverted to her commanding form.

"Cadet Jones, congratulations on passing the training." Laura said.

"Thank you ma'am." Bethany responded tightly, Adrian had no doubt that he would need to explain some things later.

Laura nodded and then turned to her desk where two black boxes that sat there. She picked them up and turned back towards them.

"I know that both of you are wondering why you are here. The answer is simple, I wanted to inform you of your earned ranks and

your assignment in person." She opened the boxes and retrieved two sets of Low Prime insignia. "Both of you are granted the ranks of Low Prime in the Olympus Fleet." She pinned the ranks on both of their shoulders. They were stunned they never expected such a high rank, at most they would be given the rank of Adjutant. Their faces must have conveyed their thoughts because Laura smiled. "There was much debate over what ranks were to be given to those who passed the training, you have all exceeded our expectations, most the others have gotten the ranks of Station Handlers or Adjutants, but the two of you were the only ones to get the Low Prime ranks. There was a lot of arguing over that decision, some even wanted to give you a higher rank, mostly because your scores in the simulations at the Academy, and those during the past year far surpassed those of our fleet officers. But in the end we decided that while you were impressive at the Academy, you still lacked experience."

Bethany and Adrian were speechless, they couldn't have known how their scores measured up to others who weren't at the Academy.

"As for your assignment. Both of you are going to be posted at the same ship, at least for a little while, the ships name is Athena. Most of the ship's crew is currently on leave, and had transported out to Mars, the ship is going through upgrades and there isn't much to do, so Adrian you will to assume position as the acting Ship Master, and Bethany as the acting High Prime. When the Athena's Ship Master and High Prime return, Adrian you will assume the position of Low Prime, while you Bethany will transfer to Neith, which should be arriving at the same time for its scheduled upgrades, its crew, like that of Athena will be going on leave, and you will assume the position as Ship Master. This is so that you may gain some experience commanding a real ship, though there won't be much to do." Laura finished with a grin.

Stunned once more the only thing Bethany and Adrian could do was to stare at Laura. A moment later the name of the ship they were posted on clicked with something Adrian learned years ago.

"Athena?" Adrian asked. "Isn't that…"

"Yes." Laura responded. "We have high hopes for the two of you. And now I believe it is time you go and report to your new posts."

With one last smile she sent them off. After they left her offices Bethany turned on Adrian.

"You know the Fleets Master?" She asked in whisper.

"Yes." Adrian said.

"Care to elaborate?" Bethany asked.

"It's complicated." Adrian said. Bethany just kept looking at him until he relented. "She kind off adopted me." He said finally.

"Adopted you." Bethany looked at him strangely, and then a look

passed over her face that Adrian knew very well.

"No! She never favored me! I didn't even know her before I was invited to join the Academy." Adrian said quickly.

Bethany looked shamefaced. "Sorry." She said.

"It's ok."

"What was it that she said to you at the end, something about the ship? Do you know it?" She asked.

"I know of it." Adrian said.

Again she looked at him funny.

"You seem to know an awful lot." She said. But this time it was in a playful tone.

"Yeah." Adrian said a little embarrassed. "Athena and Neith are warships."

It took Adrian a few steps to realize that Bethany wasn't walking with him, he turned and saw her staring at him incredulously. "Warships!" She yelled.

Adrian shushed her, and walked to her.

"Warships?" She asked in a whisper.

"Yes, they were built a few years ago, so that we may have something to protect ourselves with. Just in case."

Bethany's incredulous expression soon turned to excited.

"We are going to serve on a warship." She said smiling brightly.

"Yes." Adrian said. He turned and led the way to the where the ship was docked, Bethany following excitedly.

Chapter Nineteen

March 2103

"Are you sure this will work?" President Lucas Von Holt of Concordis asked Admiral Jan Weiss. They were in Berlin, inside his office. The rest of the room was filled with the other leaders of Concordis. The representatives of the council of three, Maria Hughes, Emerson Tully and Yuri Petrov , the Minister of the Economy Amelia Turner, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Boris Vitkovic and the Minister of Defense Victor Ross.

"Our plan is solid." Admiral Weiss said.

President Von Holt sighed. "Are we absolutely sure that there is no other alternative?" He asked the room.

"We have tried everything in our power, but the bastard won't budge." Minister of Foreign Affairs Vitkovic said tiredly.

"He is right Mr. President. Tomas Klein won't change his mind, he will never sell us his technology. And we can't keep going like this. He keeps us under his control, we are too dependent on them, and we can't afford to stop doing business with Olympus." Minister of the Economy Turner said.

"Could we find another solution maybe? Sometime in the future? Olympus had always dealt fairly with us, none of you showed me any proof that they plan on changing that." President Von Holt said.

"It doesn't matter, they are dealing fairly with us yes, but they keep all the power. Each year they are gaining more and more of a technological edge on us. If they shared their technology we could have brought an end to most of our problems, overpopulation, hunger, disease." Minister of Defense Ross said.

"Tomas Klein offered to use their technology for us." President said.

"Yes, but with Olympus in charge, they want to keep all the control, we wouldn't be allowed anywhere near their technology, and in the end they would be seen as the saviors by the people." Minister of Economy Turner said.

"Mr. President it is our belief that he wants to control the entire world, every move he made since even before Olympus was created suggests that, as his final goal." Minister of Foreign Affairs Vitkovic said.

"Well if that is the case, why are we not under Olympus rule?" President asked.

"We don't know sir. But the truth is that we are even now in his power, and we can't afford not to act. If we are to regain our self-sufficiency we must do this now." Admiral Weiss said.

“Are you 100% sure that your plan will work as you presented?” President asked.

“Yes sir. Olympus has no assets to prevent it, and if everything goes according to plan, we will come out as heroes. Even if they suspect something they won’t be able to act, public opinion will be on our side, we have news stories ready to go live.” Admiral Weiss said confidently.

“It’s the “if everything goes according to plan” part that has me worried.” President said, he looked across the room at the council representatives. “Are you all in agreement? Are we going through with this?” He asked.

The three looked at each other and then each said a clear “Yes.”

President Lucas Von Holt took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“Very well then.” He opened his eyes and looked at the people around him. “Put your plan into action, and hope to god that it works, because if you fail that will be the end of Concordis.”

* * *

Seven days later

Captain Reginald Smith sat in the command chair aboard the bridge of Concordis military vessel Bismarck, the bridge was almost an exact copy of a navy carrier bridge, with a few stations removed and a few added, a bit larger perhaps, and of course without any windows, there was a big screen mounted inside the front wall, it could show the images from the outside of the ship, the ship had some of the more advanced optical cameras and telescopes created. The Bismarck was the first of her kind, a herald of a new age, the age of spaceflight. Captain Smith had been serving or commanded a naval vessel for the most of his life, and when plans for the Bismarck came, he was on the very short list of its potential captains. She and her two sister ships were ugly ships by any criteria, but then, they didn’t need to be pretty. They were there to protect Concordis interests in space. The weaponry of the ship was crude by some standards and yet in a way sophisticated. There were many ideas about weapons in space, but with no experience they had decided on a more proven concepts. Rocket propelled missiles where a simple solution, they were guided and each had 50 kilotons of explosive. They weren’t the biggest they could make but the brass decided that it was enough. Their range was just around 150.000 km at their max effective range. Those who served aboard them had taken to calling the ship a missile boat, which they were in a way. They handled like pigs, and looked like uneven grey boxes. There were many antennae on the hull, sensors,

communication relays and such, though those were concentrated on the bottom of the ship towards the end and their drives were improvement on those that were used almost a century ago to get a man on the moon.

Captain Smith looked around the bridge, he was familiar with many of the crew, and was quickly becoming acquainted with the rest. They were all good men and women, loyal to their country, which was the reason why they got this assignment.

The Bismarck's mission was complicated, and also top secret, they were to dock with Olympus Cloud station, then two squads of marines, dressed in such a way as to not appear to be from Concordis, would board the station, Captain Smith didn't know their part of the mission, but he was assured that there would be no casualties. The Cloud station only had a handful of security officers, there had never been any need for more, and he was assured that they would surrender rather than risk injury to the civilian population of the station. The Bismarck was to play a part of a vessel hijacked by a dissident group. After docking they would transmit demands to Olympus, and stall until the marines finished their mission. The Bismarck's two sister ships are even now following behind them, on orders to keep their distance, when Bismarck docks with the station, the Dauntless and the Viking would come into range and offer their help to Olympus, the Bismarck, after the marines accomplished their mission, would surrender into Concordis custody, the treat of two Concordis ships changing their mind. It was devised in such a way to fool the public eye, and they already had the dissidents that they plan to frame in custody. Captain Smith wasn't 100% comfortable with the mission, but he was a soldier, and he followed orders. He knew that their mission objective was something important to the survival of Concordis.

Lieutenant Kraus turned in his seat at the communications station towards the Captain who watched a display in front of his chair, display showed the Bismarck's current course, speed and a number of other important stats.

"We are being contacted by the Station Captain." Lt. Kraus said.

"Follow the plan, ignore them." Captain said.

The Captain then turned back to his display, trying to imagine what was going through the minds of those on the station. His first officer, Commander Olga Pavlov interrupted him by leaning over from her chair beside him.

"Are we sure that they have no defensive capabilities." She whispered as to not be heard by the rest of the bridge. Captain Smith scowled at her for such blatant distrust of their superiors, but managed to subdue the impulse to scold her in presence of those

serving under them, and this was their first real mission in space, and he understood that she like probably everyone on board were a bit afraid.

"The intel is solid Commander, our ambassadors to Olympus have been living on the station for years and they didn't notice anything that looked like a weapon system, nor did our spies find anything that suggests that they have defensive capabilities." Captain Smith said in a whisper.

Commander Pavlov nodded her head and leaned back in her chair, looking at the displays in front of her chair.

"Contacts from Viking and Dauntless." Lt. Kraus said.

"Ignore them, just as planned." Captain said.

It was a delicate dance they were playing, their ship must appear as if it was taken over, and the two other ships in pursuit, they were a long way behind them, Bismarck was given two hours before the other ships were sent into pursuit. And in a few minutes Bismarck will dock with the station, and proceed with their mission. Captain Smith had no doubt that Olympus had contacted Concordis government demanding an explanation, and hopefully they were already told that the ship was hijacked and that it would be best for them to abide by our demands until the two other Concordis ships arrive. A moment later Captain saw the ships that were either docked or in the vicinity of the station getting away from the station. *They learned that this is a rebel vessel now, and are removing their ships from their path, good.* Captain Smith thought, with no other ships in the vicinity there will be almost no chance for someone to try and be a hero, though in truth there wasn't much they could do, their ships were not warships.

Captain instructed his first officer to turn on the front screen to the view outside, and he watched as his ship approached the docking point of the station, his fingernails biting into the chairs armrest.

* * *

Major Denis Taylor did not look forward to his mission, but he was soldier and he followed orders, just like his team. They were currently sitting inside the Bismarck's cargo bay, and were waiting for the go signal to enter the station, and begin their mission. The mission was highly classified, they were here for the data that was stored on one of the servers on the station. Taylor didn't know what the data was nor did he care, he was here to do a job, he didn't need to know everything. His squad mate opened a comm channel and informed him that the Captain had relayed their demands and instructions to the people on the station. Hopefully the security wouldn't try to play

soldiers and get themselves killed. Major looked up as he got the go ahead from the ships communication officer. The go ahead also meant that their communications countermeasures were deployed. Concordis might not be on the same level technologically as Olympus, but they still had some tricks under their sleeves, the plan was to deploy a comm dampening device built into the ship as soon as they docked, it had only a short range but enough to cut off the station from the other Olympus facilities. It only stopped radio waves, but seeing as the Earth was in the way of other Olympus stations, they wouldn't be able to establish contact with laser comms. He got to his feet and took team through the corridor and into the station. His team was split into two squads, each with a different goal, the team that Major Taylor led was to secure and attain the server, while the other one had a delivery to the engineering. He did not like that part of the mission, but he understood the necessity for it. The team split immediately after entering the station, they already knew the layout. Taylor's team managed to run through two decks without encountering anyone. Taylor thought that the Olympus personnel listened to the Captains demands, but as they got to the deck containing the servers, they encountered resistance.

One of his team went down, struck by a bullet in the chest, another grabbed him as he fell and dragged him back behind the wall. As Taylor crouched down, he noticed that the man was still alive, and that there was no blood on him. He looked closely and noticed the impression the bullet made as it struck him, but it didn't penetrate the armor.

"Looks like the rumors are true, they got some kind of stun ammo. Don't let them hit you. Morris, throw a few gas bombs in there." Taylor said.

Morris moved into position and threw two canisters of sleep gas, their armor had air breathers installed, while the security personnel had only light armor. Immediately after they started hearing coughing. The intel said that there were only six security officers on board the station. There were more in the early days of the station, but as there was no need for them, the number was reduced to a handful. So there couldn't be more than six of them inside, and probably less, if they split so that they could try and stop both teams. The Cloud station's population was also reduced from what it was before. As Olympus transferred its interests to the moon, people moved from the station. There was supposed to be barely three hundred people on it now. The security personnel of Olympus were good, he would give them that, but they were not prepared for this kind of assault.

A few moments later the coughing stopped, and Taylor moved his

team inside, they found three security officers on the ground, the gas was not lethal, but they would awake with a killer headache. *They won't be waking up at all,* Taylor corrected himself. He moved deeper inside the room, where the Olympus servers were located. He motioned for Hughes, their computer expert to get on the job of disconnecting the server core.

"Taylor to Novak, report." Taylor called the other team leader.

"Light resistance, package in place." Novak responded.

"Good, secure the perimeter, meet us at the ship in an hour." Taylor said.

Hughes kept working on isolating the server and separating it. Olympus software was high grade, and as such they didn't have the time to try and crack it, so they would be bringing the core with them. Taylor told his team to secure the area, and informed the Captain that everything was going according to plan.

Chapter Twenty

Tomas looked up from his desk, as Laura barged into his office.

"There is a Concordis warship heading straight for Cloud station." Laura said.

"What?" Tomas asked. "Could it be heading somewhere else?"

"No, it going straight for Cloud. It's not responding to any of our attempts at communication."

"Did you contact Concordis?"

"Yes, they are blocking me." She said angrily.

Tomas sent the request for Elias, Seo-yun and Nadia over his implant to come to the office immediately. They all had offices here at the Moon base. He told Laura and she sat down on one of the couches in the office. He got on the comms with Concordis ambassador immediately after sending the request. A minute later, the others arrived, while Tomas was speaking with the Concordis ambassador.

"What do you mean hijacked!" Tomas yelled at the image suspended in the air above his desk.

"The dissidents had resources, and we suspect that it was an inside job. We have already sent our two other ships in pursuit, if you could inform your people on the station to go with the dissidents demands and buy us time for our other ships to arrive, we can resolve the situation." Ambassador said, in a manner that telegraphed to Tomas that it was rehearsed. Tomas didn't bother to answer him and just closed the connection.

"You heard?" He asked the room.

Elias put his hand up, and was nodding in a way he always did when he was talking with someone via his implant. Two minutes later he closed his eyes and then opened them and looked right at Tomas.

"They are lying." Elias said.

"I know that! I just don't know about what!" Tomas yelled frustrated.

"I got in contact with my people on the Concordis station. The ship Concordis claims is hijacked, was boarded by its original crew in secret. There are no dissidents on that ship." Elias said.

"What the hell are they up to?" Tomas asked.

"Do your people know the reason behind this?" Laura asked.

"No, but they did say that there was an arrest made a few days ago, a dissident cell, that was kept secret."

"What do they think they could get from this? They must be after our technology, but I have no idea how they plan to get away with this, we know that there are no rebels on that ship." Nadia asked.

Tomas grimaced. "No we don't." He said sourly.

“What do you mean, we don’t know?” Seo-yun asked incredulously.

“If we know, then that means we have spies in their ranks, and if we have spies in their ranks that means that they will have grounds against us. They played this perfectly, if we say we know, they tell the world we have been spying on them, if we do nothing they will save us and be regarded as heroes, not to mention what they will recover from the station.” Tomas said bitingly.

“They know that Cloud station has no technology that they ca—”

“Damn!” Tomas interrupted Seo-yun. “Yes there is technology, the servers, they hold all of our files on our tech, including those on the alien ship and everything we translated from it. There is no technology on the station worth recovering, but they will get everything from the files, it will only be a matter of time until they manage to make sense of the tech.”

Seo-yun’s eyes widened. “We can’t allow them to get that. This just proves that you were right. They are not ready for that.” She said.

“I don’t see what we can do to stop them.” Elias said slowly.

“Where is our closest warship?” Tomas asked Laura.

“It’s on a patrol between Mars and the belt.” She said. “It would take it at least a week at full burn to get here.”

“Wait, isn’t there a ship docked here?” Elias asked.

Laura’s expression turned surprised for a moment, but she quickly hid it behind her professional mask.

“It’s undergoing upgrades, we were putting in the new FTL comms, and the crew is on leave, the Ship Master and other officers are visiting their families on Mars.” She said.

“But it has crew?” Tomas asked.

“The ship is crewed with those that passed from the Academy, we gave them some time to get acquainted with the ship, before more experienced officers returned. They are kids Tomas.” Laura said.

“You told me that some of those kids where even better that the officer we had in command.” Tomas said.

“In simulations yes, they have no experience in real situations.” Laura said weakly.

“Who did you put in command?” Tomas asked with a hard look in his eyes.

“Adrian.” She responded, closing her eyes.

Tomas’s eyes softened when he heard and recognized the name.

“I know that you care about the boy Laura, but I need Laura the Fleets Master now, not Laura the mother. Can he command that ship?” Tomas asked, Laura had told him that she felt as if Adrian was her son. And that she hoped to recognize him as such in time, if he was willing.

“Yes.” She said softly.

Tomas moved around his desk and hugged Laura. He moved his head back and looked in her eyes.

“You once told me that he had the potential to become something great. Trust in him now.” He said.

Laura nodded, and swiped her hand across her eyes, a moment later she regained her composure.

“Alright. What are your orders?” She asked.

“I want them to get there as fast as they can, that ship can’t be allowed to go back with our files.” Tomas said. Then he turned to Elias. “Tell our people on station to try and stall them but not to endanger their lives.”

Elias nodded and closed his eyes, sending orders through the implant to be relayed to the station. Laura walked to Tomas’s desk and started giving orders to the people working on upgrading the ship, to stop their work and then she opened the channel to Athena and her commanding officer.

* * *

Adrian was lying in bed inside the Ship Masters quarters reading a book, it was a good book, about the humanity’s first contact with alien life. He was quickly adapting to the life on a ship, he held the first watch, then let Bethany take over the second, and Noah the third watch. He was the one of their teammates that were assigned to this ship with Bethany and Adrian, he gained the rank of Adjutant and served as the ships third officer, Alexander was in the med bay serving and learning under Chief Medical Officer John Lightman, one of the two people that didn’t go on leave with the rest of the crew. The other being Chief Engineer Belinda Martinez, she remained to oversee the upgrades to the ship. They were supposed to install a new type of a communication device, apparently one that was faster than light, though it had the ordinary laser comm and radio capability as well, and there were also some minor adjustments to their drives, but those were finished two days ago. Now, the only thing that was left was the comm device, and that should be done in about a day or so.

Just as he was getting to a good part of the book his comm started beeping. It was the one on his desk, which had the video capability. Implants could send, receive and play video, but they didn’t support live video chat, for obvious reasons, they couldn’t transmit the users face.

Adrian got up from his bed and walked to his desk, it was close to 15:00 hours, and he wondered who it was, he had just gotten off his

watch in the Command Center an hour ago. He activated the comm and was surprised to see Laura's face. Judging by her expression he figured that this wasn't a social call, so he snapped off a salute.

"Fleets Master." Adrian said.

Laura returned the salute, and Adrian saw approval in her expression before it slipped behind her professional mask.

"Ship Master Farkas." Laura said. Immediately Adrian realized that this was serious so he turned all his attention to her image.

"Approximately two hours ago, a Concordis warship was stolen by dissidents, at least that is the official version, and it has since then made its way to Cloud station, where we expect it to dock in four minutes. The truth is that there are no dissidents on board that ship, it is crewed by Concordis personnel, and we believe that this is a scheme on their part in order to acquire our technology. There are two Concordis ships on their way to the station. You mission is to disconnect from the dock as soon as possible, and set course to Cloud station at maximum speed. We are going to inform Concordis leadership to keep their two ships out of our territory, you are to position your ship between them and the "dissident ship", board the vessel if possible, but if they refuse, you can't under any circumstances allow that ship to go back to Concordis hands. If they don't surrender to you, you have the authority to destroy that ship. Do you understand your orders?" She asked. Adrian's mouth had gone dry, he looked Laura in the eyes.

"Yes ma'am."

"Good. I have given you command codes equivalent of a Ship Master, and have sent a squad of army forces to the ship. You have the authorization to undock from the station." Laura said. She looked at him for a moment more, her expression showing an emotion Adrian hadn't seen before on her face, and then she terminated the connection.

Adrian immediately jumped from the chair and dressed, while sending the command to the computer to put the ship on blue alert, meaning that everyone was to go to their posts. They had a few drills in the last few days, so he knew that they would follow the order. Bethany was already on the bridge as it was her watch. It took him less than thirty seconds since the moment the communication from Fleets Master ended, to the moment he stepped in the Command Center. The Command Center's walls were round, and after they reached the height of a meter and a half they started to curve towards each other, making the room resemble the inside of a dome, all of the walls were also screens, using a type of nanotechnology any part of the wall could be turned into a screen, it could also project a 360° feed from the ships outside cameras, when turned on it looked as if the

Command Center was on top of the ship and had the view of everything around. It didn't have any special tactical advantage, but he was told that it looked amazing when the ship was close to a planet, such as Mars. The stations were oriented in a half circle all facing the same direction. Those were from left to right, science, sensor, navigation and weapons station, behind them a was a holo-desk, it was installed just a few days ago, and had the ability to show a 3D representation of the ships surroundings, it was a smart software that took all the information from the ship sensors and then created a virtual representation of the space around them, scaled down of course, it also showed a lot more information, but Adrian didn't have a lot of time to get himself familiar with it. On the left side of the holo-desk was the communication station, it was the only one that was separate from the others, and was oriented towards the "side" instead of the "front" of the ship, behind the Holo-desk and on a platform was the Ship Master's "command chair" and besides it on a slightly lower platform, was the High Prime's chair. Adrian made his way to the command chair currently occupied by Bethany. When she noticed him she turned to him and scowled, not bothering to get up.

"Another drill Adrian? You are taking this position too seriously, you need to relax an—"

"High Prime, I need a status report from all systems." He interrupted her. Then he turned to the acting Communication Handler Gillian Estevez, she was one of the Academy graduates that chose to enter service at the rank of cadet. "Contact engineering, they need to prep the drives, and inform the team working on the upgrades to abort any operations they have in progress and return to the ship." Everyone turned around and just looked at him like he was crazy. Bethany stared at him open mouthed still sitting in his chair. Adrian looked at her with a stony face.

"High Prime, the Ship Master has entered CC, why are you still sitting in my chair." He asked calmly. Something in his voice must have clicked with her because she got out of the chair. Adrian took his position in the command chair, he looked around and noticed that everyone still just looked at him, three of the older cadets who were now at the stations for Navigation, Sensors and Weapons had amused looks and were chuckling amongst themselves. The atmosphere in Olympus was more relaxed than in Earth militaries, but there was still a clear chain of command, and their behavior was inexcusable. They didn't know that this wasn't a drill, and even if it was, they needed to take it seriously.

"I gave you an order. This is not a drill." He said to the room, only Communication Handler Estevez listened to him and got on the comms with engineering, Adrian told Iris to remember and remind

him about Estevez later, the rest kept looking at him, while the three older cadets resumed their amused chuckling. He knew that they disliked drills, but their behavior was unacceptable. He informed the security that their presence was required in CC via his implant, and sent them his new command codes, the ones Laura gave him. He then informed those from the second and third watch he knew would follow his orders to the CC to replace the ones he was about to kick out.

He looked at the older cadets, one of them returned to what he was doing before Adrian walked in, while others shook their heads and talked ignoring Adrian. A moment later six security officers entered the CC. Adrian pointed to the three Cadets.

“Throw those three in the brig. Keep them there until I tell you otherwise.” He told them.

“Understood, Ship Master.” Their leader said. All off them looked as young as anyone else in the CC, but Adrian knew that they were older, some even from the time before Olympus went into space. They moved professionally and subdued the struggling Cadets.

“Hey! What the hell do you think you are doing!?” One of them yelled. Adrian stood up and glared at him.

“Did you think I was joking? I told you that this wasn’t a drill! You have cost us precious time we need to accomplish our mission. You are a disgrace, you don’t deserve to be here. Even if this was a drill, your job is to FOLLOW MY ORDERS!” Adrian yelled at them. They grew silent at his outburst and the security took them out. As they were going out the three other crewmembers Adrian called to replace them entered the CC, one of them was Noah, they had heard his outburst and had a slightly frightened looks on their faces. He ordered them to their positions with Noah taking the weapons station. He looked at Bethany.

“High Prime, you have two minutes to get me reports from all systems on my display.” He told her calmly.

Bethany finally snapped out of her trance and got to work.

Comms Handler Estevez turned to Adrian.

“I have Chief Engineer Martinez for you, Ship Master.” She said.

“Put her through.”

A moment later the image on Chief Engineer Martinez showed on the display above his armrest. She had a hard look on her young face, she had dark hair and brown eyes, which narrowed as she looked at him.

“I have been ordered to abandon the upgrades and come back inside the ship by Fleet. Do you happen to know why?”

“Chief Martinez.” Adrian started. “This ship has been ordered to get underway to a hostile situation. You and your people have ten

minutes to abort any upgrades you were conducting, and get inside the ship. If you are not inside the ship in that period of time, you will be left behind." He looked at the Chief with stony face.

"A hostile situation? But—" Adrian sent her his command codes. She was one of the ships original crew, and had much more experience than him, and he knew that she probably didn't have the habit of questioning her orders and wouldn't have done so if Athena's "real" Ship Master was in command, and Adrian was not willing to burn any bridges with her.

Her eyes widened for a second as her implant authenticated the codes.

"Yes Ship Master." She said, and closed the channel.

Bethany who was close enough to overhear all of their exchange looked at him with a fearful look.

"A hostile situation?" She asked.

"Yes." Adrian said simply.

"Comms, put me through the ship wide speakers." Estevez nodded and a minute later the icon appeared on his display indicating that the ship wide speakers were on.

"Attention crewmembers. Approximately two hours ago, a hostile warship was headed towards Cloud base, followed by two Concordis warships, it is expected to dock with the station any moment now. We have been ordered to intercept and take that warship under our custody. Or if that fails to destroy it. We are not to engage Concordis vessels unless given reason to. This is not a drill." Adrian took a beat to take another breath. "I know that this is not what you imagined your first true mission to be, but this it is. Remember your training, but keep in mind that this is not a simulation, if you make a mistake people will die. Trust in yourselves, and we will accomplish our mission together. That is all." He closed the channel.

Bethany turned to him, with a professional expression, she had managed to push her fear down. *Good, I will need her,* Adrian thought. *"Yes you will."* Iris told him.

He didn't have a chance to respond because Bethany sent him the reports on all systems. He looked them over, noticing that everything was good to go.

"The team doing the upgrades is back inside, the drives are operational. And there is a squad of army forces requesting permission to come aboard Ship Master." Bethany said.

"Allow them inside, put them in the cargo bay, Navigation, disconnect us from the dock as soon as they are onboard, and set a course for Cloud station, maximum speed." Adrian said. He left his crew to do the rest, there was nothing else for him to do until they reach the station.

Chapter Twenty-one

"While we appreciate your offer ambassador, space around Cloud station is Olympus territory under international law, and we are not prepared to let you warships inside our territory." Tomas said to the ambassador of Concordis, they were speaking over the comms, as usual the ambassador was on the surface of the Moon.

"Surely you see that we only want to help? We want to prevent any loss of life, and since it is partially our fault, we would like to be of service, seeing as you have no assets that can intervene." Ambassador said. Tomas was grinding his teeth with every word the ambassador said.

"We respectfully decline, we are well on our way to handle the situation, if your ships enter our territory, we will take that as enormous breach of our trust." Tomas said. "Inform your superiors of my decision."

"Mr. Klein you must see th—" Tomas cut of the comm, not wanting to listen to the ambassador anymore.

"Laura, what's the situation." Tomas asked.

"We still don't have contact with the station, nothing since they docked and sent their list of demands. We have no satellites in earth orbit to relay a laser signal around the Earth, and Cloud station wasn't yet equipped with the FTL comms."

Tomas grimaced at the mention of the demands. The list was full of crazy demands that no sane person would ask for, only reinforcing their belief that this is a Concordis plan.

"I want all of our warships recalled. They are to make top speed to the Moon." He said. Laura nodded and opened a channel from the comm device in front of her. They had moved to one of the briefing rooms, following the departure of Athena. Many other Olympus staff members were in the room, each doing their job, gathering information, or relaying orders.

Elias was in the process of recalling army forces from Mars, in case this gets out of the control, but they won't be here for a month or so. Seo-yun was in contact with all of their research facilities on the Moon, those facilities were in process of being reinforced, in case that they strike somewhere else also.

"How long until Athena arrives?" Tomas asked Laura.

"Another hour and thirty two minutes." She said. Tomas looked at his screens, the estimated time of arrival for the Concordis ships based on the information they got from Cloud prior to the comms blackout was an hour and twenty nine minutes, Athena will arrive three minutes after the Concordis ships. The only good thing from this is

that they will not be able to see her, as she would be coming from around the planet.

Tomas looked around the room, he never felt as powerless as he did now, there was nothing he could do that would help, other than believe in his people, he chose them, he gave them Olympus and now it was time for them to give back.

* * *

“He isn’t going to change his mind Mr. President.” Turner, Concordis ambassador to Olympus said.

“He can’t believe that his people on the station can take care of this?” President asked no one in particular.

“He seems confident that they will have the situation under control, I don’t know how, but I have been working with the man for a long time, I know him, he has something up his sleeve, I would stake my life on it.” Ambassador Turner said.

“Do we have any idea what it could be?” President Von Holt asked his advisers. They were sitting in the same room they were when they made the decision to go through with this plan.

“Our intelligence officers are confident that there is nothing they can do.” Admiral Weiss said.

“This is very suspicious, the plan is already going wrong, we planned on Tomas Klein being relieved when we offered our help. Maybe we shouldn’t have put this into motion.” Councilman Petrov said.

“There is no going back now, we are committed, there is no way they will be able to stop us, and our press teams will spin it in our favor, they will not be able to contest our entering their territory.” Minister of Defense Ross said.

“He is right gentlemen, there is nothing we can do now.” President Von Holt said. He prayed that they have made the right choice, and that whatever Tomas Klein had up his sleeve comes too late to make a difference.

* * *

Tucker Dawson, Captain of the Viking, kept his eyes locked on his display, the Admiralty had just confirmed that Olympus did not allow them to enter their territory, but his orders were to do so anyway, they already had scripted communications that will be sent to Bismarck when they enter Olympus territory. The communications

were nothing more than a series of posturing and threats on their part, which would hopefully convince the public that Bismarck's crew was intimidated and choose to leave the station alone, should the communications ever go public. Though there was a catch that only he as the officer in charge of the mission was aware of. The plan was more complicated than it seemed. The marine detachment on the station had a mission that most of the high brass wasn't aware of. Not even Admiral Weiss was aware of it, the one who gave the order was the Minister of Defense. They can't leave anything that might implicate them. The loss of the server from the station would make it clear that they took them. But if there was no station, they wouldn't be able to confirm that anything was missing. Dawson understood, and agreed with the Minister completely. Olympus was a plague on humanity, they talked about equality, about unity, and yet they kept their technology out of the other nations hands. He hated them, and most of all that pompous jerk Klein. Dawson's wife was working for a subsidiary of Olympus before they started expanding in space. She held a high position, had a big salary, Olympus always paid well. But when they started transferring their business to space, they closed down, sold, or transferred most of the subsidiaries on Earth to space. He and his wife declined Olympus offer to transfer to space, even though his wife wanted to, but one of the condition was that Dawson resigns from Concordis military and join Olympus security. And he wasn't willing to trade a life in the military for a security job. His wife argued with him for days before finally relenting, she lost her job but got a recommendation from Olympus. It did her no good, the state of the economy in Concordis was such, that at the time she just couldn't get a job. From then on everything went downhill, they struggled with money, his pay wasn't enough to cover the lifestyle she was used to, and they argued all the time, until she finally left him for a wealthier man. A man who could offer her the lifestyle she was used to. And Dawson knew that Olympus was the cause. He hated Tomas Klein with a deep unyielding force, it was the only thing that kept him going. And now he had the chance to break Klein's hold on Earth. Tomas Klein thought himself Earths protector, he treated them like children, keeping all the new toys out of their reach. *I'll show him,* Dawson thought, as looked back to his screen. They were almost there, a few more minutes and they would enter Olympus space.

He looked to his first officer. "Contact Dauntless, they are to start transmitting as soon as we pass into Olympus territory."

Dawson turned his eyes back to the screen that now showed the enhanced image of Cloud station. *Yes, soon.*

* * *

“We are receiving communications from Dauntless Captain.” Comm officer said.

Captain Reginald Smith of Bismarck turned to him from his study of the screen in front of him.

“Start sending them prepared packages.” He said, and then turned to his first officer. “Are the marines safely aboard?” He asked.

“Yes, Captain.”

“Good, disconnect us from the station, and set a course away from our ships, we must appear as if we are trying to escape.” Captain Smith said. A minute later they were disconnected from the station, and heading away from the Earth, Viking and Dauntless following. So far everything was going according to plan.

“Captain, we are detecting another ship on an intercept course!” Sensor officer yelled.

“What? Where is it coming from?” Captain asked. The ships sensors looked for a heat signature that was given by spaceships drives, it worked in tandem with their visual sensors to then detect the ships trajectory.

“It just came from around the planet Captain. The sensor readings match that of an Olympus drive, but we can’t match the visual. And Captain, its coming fast, a lot faster than anything we thought Olympus had.” The sensor officer said his voice wavering slightly. Captain Smith, checked the stats of the new ship and was amazed. The ship was traveling at least four times their max speed, and it was slowing down. They could go from the Earth to the moon in a hour or two if they wanted, then it dawned on Captain Smith that they must have come from there. He asked for a visual of the ship, and a few moments the big screen on the front wall showed the new ship, at first it was blurry but quickly the image focused and they could see the ship speed towards them. The ship had the same general shape as Bismarck, but it didn’t have any sharp angles, its corners were all rounded, soft. There were things mounted on top of the ship, it took Smith a moment to realize what they were.

“Turrets?” Captain asked without noticing that he was talking out loud.

“Captain we are getting a laser communication from that ship. Voice only.” Comms officer said.

“Patch it through.” Captain said.

“To Concordis vessel under the command of dissidents. This is Ship Master Adrian Farkas of Olympus warship Athena, shutdown your drives and prepare to be boarded. Any hostile action will result in destruction of your vessel.”

Everyone on the bridge turned towards Captain Smith with their faces pale, and he looked back at them in the same manner. *A*

warship? Olympus isn't supposed to have warships! And yet, there one was, racing towards them at an unimaginable speeds. He was just about to try and contact his sister ships when his Comm officer yelled out.

"Captain. The Station!" Comm officer yelled, his voice terrified.

* * *

Major Taylor was sitting back in the cargo hold of Bismarck, a part of their mission accomplished, as proved by the evidence in the palm of his hand.

"It's really small." He said.

"Olympus has superior technology, that little thing has the capacity to store the entirety of data created on Earth since the start of the internet age." The man who extracted the core, Hughes said.

"Really? That's impressive." Taylor said. He turned the core in his hand one more time, and then stored it away in a special container they brought with them. After securing the core, he turned to Novak.

"Are we away enough from the station?" He asked, there was no need to elaborate, they both knew the reason for the question.

"Yes Major." Novak said.

Taylor looked around his men, he sighed. "Do it."

Novak took out a small device from his belt, there were two switches, and a red light. As he pressed one of the switches the light turned blue. He then pressed the other switch, the light flashed twice and then turned green.

"It's done." Novak said.

Taylor nodded, there was no need for anything else, it was their job.

* * *

"We are receiving a voice only communication from the new ship Captain." Viking's Comm officer said.

Captain Tucker Dawson, turned to his Comm officer.

"Play it."

A moment later the speakers around the bridge came to life and a commanding voice boomed out.

"To Concordis vessels. This is Ship Master Adrian Farkas of Olympus warship Athena, you are in direct violation of the international law. Turn your ships around and exit Olympus space, any other action will be treated as hostile, and will be responded to as such." The voice said.

Dawson slammed his hand on the armrest. He looked at the video of the approaching ship, provided by their visual sensors. Olympus had warships. How could have that gone unnoticed by everyone Dawson wondered. The arrogance, they weren't even a real country. He was convinced that it was all part of Tomas Klein's plan. He might have even goaded the politicians to attempt this move, so that he may turn out a hero. He thought that his one ship was enough to turn them away from their goals. Well he was mistaken. Dawson turned to his Comm officer intending to send a message to the other Concordis ships.

"Captain! The Cloud station just blew up." Viking's sensor officer yelled out.

Dawson stopped, for a moment he had forgotten about that part of the mission, he shook his head and forced himself to think clearly. His mission was to retrieve the server core. Slowly he pushed his anger aside, and tried to think clearly, he still had a mission to accomplish.

Chapter Twenty-two

Adrian Farkas looked helplessly at the screen as the Cloud station blew up, there was nothing to indicate that it was going to happen, one moment it was there, and the next it was in pieces. Pieces that were now falling down to Earth, some will burn up in the atmosphere, but others, Adrian knew would survive and crash into the planet. Everyone in the Command Center shared Adrian's feelings at the moment, the heavy weight in their chests, the feeling of total helplessness. Adrian allowed himself and others a second more of sorrow, and then he turned to his Comm Handler.

"Comms, inform the Fleet of the situation." He said coldly, there would be time later for sorrow for the souls that perished with the station, they had a job to do now.

"Bethany, I want tracks on movements of all three ships." Adrian said. Bethany nodded and went to work.

"Weapons, get me targeting solutions on all three ships." Adrian told Noah, who got to work immediately.

"Navigation, get us closer to the dissident ship, put us between it and the Concordis ships."

"The Fleets Master Reiss is on the comms for you Ship Master." Estevez said.

Adrian accepted the call, and immediately Laura's face filled his screen.

"Ship Master Farkas, from this moment you have authorization to open fire on Concordis ships, try to avoid it, but if they keep ignoring your warnings, fire a warning shot. As for the dissident ship, disable them, it is now imperative that you take ship and its crew prisoner. Do you understand?" She asked grimly.

"Yes, Fleets Master." Adrian responded.

Laura nodded and ended the call.

"Comms record a message for the Concordis ships." Adrian said.

Estevez gave the go ahead.

"Concordis vessels, turn your ships around and leave Olympus space. This is your last warning." Adrian said.

"Comms record another message for the fleeing ship." Adrian said.

"Power down your drives, surrender and prepare to be boarded, you have—" Adrian looked at the estimated time it will take for the Concordis ships to intercept it. It showed 13 minutes."-five minutes to acknowledge this message, or we will open fire." Estevez sent the message.

"I have the tracks, Ship Master." Bethany said. Rather than

sending it to his screen she turned on the holo-desk. Image of Athena was shown in the middle, with its current course represented in a white line, the other ships were shown also, with their trajectories shown also but with a blue line, a red orb signified where Cloud station used to be, other information was shown, distances between the ships, and their speed were shown on a board that floated above the hologram constantly updated. Adrian was amazed at the amount of the information showed there, much more than his screen could show, he knew that Bethany was playing around with the holo-desk since it arrived but wasn't aware that she was this proficient with it. He looked at the fleeing ship, it was going a lot slower than Athena's top speed, but they had slowed down in order to not over shoot the station, Concordis ships were closer, and even though they moved slower they would reach the fleeing ship around the same time as Athena did.

"Did the Concordis ships respond?" Adrian asked.

"No Ship Master." Estevez said.

Adrian turned to Bethany. "Are there any signs that are going to comply with our demands?"

"None sir, they are still moving on an intercept course towards the fleeing vessel." She said.

"Weapons, you have targeting solutions on both ships?" Adrian asked Noah.

"Yes Ship Master." He responded.

"Arm two missiles, fire one at each of Concordis ships, and set them to detonate five hundred meters before impact." Adrian said.

"Yes Ship Master." Noah said.

A moment later, two new tracks appeared on the holo-desk, moving on an intercept course towards the two ships. Adrian hoped that they get the message.

* * *

"Power down your drives, surrender and prepare to be boarded, you have… Five minutes to acknowledge this message, or we will open fire." The voice boomed out of the bridge speakers.

Captain Reginald Smith of Bismarck, looked helplessly on his screen. Olympus ship was gaining on them, and he knew that it will catch them, that it will arrive after their sister ships did not matter. This mission was a failure, they will not be able to surrender into Concordis custody with an Olympus warship there, it will not allow it, not after the station blew up, and if they open fire on them, well, then one of them will be destroyed. Which will start a war one way or

another, if one didn't start already. The Marine Major confessed that he had orders to place an explosive device and to destroy the station after they accomplished their mission. He looked at his screen trying to find a way for them to accomplish the rest of the mission without starting a fight with the Olympus ship and couldn't find it. The Olympus ship didn't seem concerned with the other two Concordis ships, which suggested that they knew they could take them in a fight. And Smith hoped that Captain Dowson was competent enough to back off. This just proved that they knew nothing about Olympus, who know how much more ships they had.

Captain Smith opened a channel to the Viking, a moment later it was accepted.

"Captain Smith." Captain Dowson said, his face held a terrible expression a cross between hate and eagerness.

"Captain Dowson, you should retreat. The mission is a failure, turn around. We will surrender to Olympus, the government back home can disavow us, and try to salvage this."

"No, you will follow the plan Captain Smith. Turn your ship toward us, we will block the Olympus vessel." Captain Dowson said.

"Dear god man, we are in their territory, we have already broken the international law, let's not burry ourselves any more than we already have." Captain Smith said.

"You will follow your orders Captain!" Captain Dowson yelled at him. There was something profoundly wrong with the Captain of the Viking. Smith looked at his crew, he owed it to them, to see to it that they get out of this alive.

"No, Captain Dowson, my ship will surrender to Olympus." Captain Smith said, and closed off the channel. Just as he was to order a message sent to Olympus ship, his sensor officer yelled out.

"Weapons fire form Olympus ship!"

Before Smith had a chance to ask who was the target his sensor officer added.

"Two missiles, one on course towards the Viking and one at Dauntless."

Only two? They were warning shots Smith realized.

"Comms, send the message to Olympus ship, we are surrendering."

* * *

Captain Dowson looked on the screen watching as two missiles speed towards his ships, and exploded before hitting his ship, they were faster than his missiles, yet again Olympus technology was

superior, but his sensors officer told him that they were smaller, with a smaller payload. He knew that this were warning shots, no Captain would order only one missiles fired on a hostile ship, unless it was a warning. Dowson had no intention of heeding that warning.

"Captain, Bismarck just sent a message, they are surrendering." Viking's comm officer said.

"They are shutting down their drives." His sensor officer said.

That fool Smith was going to ruin everything, not only will Olympus have proof that this was Concordis mission, they will also know that they were after their technology. He couldn't allow that.

"Captain, we are receiving a communication from the Fleet."

"Ignore them." Dowson said. He had no time for bureaucrats and politicians.

"Captain! Dauntless is breaking off, they are going back!" His sensor officer said.

Dowson looked at the screen, one ship, just one Olympus ship had destroyed their entire plan. He couldn't let Olympus have this, he just couldn't. All the anger inside him came to the surface in one big wave.

"Target the Bismarck." Captain Dowson ordered.

"Captain?" His first officer asked.

"Target the Bismarck!" He yelled. "They have disobeyed orders, they are deserters!"

"Yes Captain." His first officer said shakily.

* * *

"The Viking is ignoring our comms Mr. President." Admiral Weiss said.

"What the hell is going on? I thought that we agreed that there will be no casualties!" President Von Holt said. He looked around the room they all looked at him with the same confused look that he wore as well, except for one. When he met his eyes he knew.

"Victor, it was you?" The Minister of Defense Victor Ross remained silent. "Why Victor?"

The rest of the room turned to look at him, their faces unbelieving of the situation.

"Because it needed to be done. And all of you are too cowardly to have done it." He said hatefully. No one had ever heard him talk like this, so they were all too shocked to say anything. "If we took the data and left the station, they would have known that we took it, hell, no matter what we did they would have known, when we started catching up to them in technology. And say whatever you will about Tomas Klein, but he would have remembered, and he wouldn't have

stayed silent." He chuckled. "Hah! You thought that you could stay his hand with the press? With public opinion? He isn't part of Earth! He doesn't care about public opinion. His people are indoctrinated to follow him! They wouldn't have cared either. So we needed to make a statement, to make him remember what happens when he tries to control us. And that station was the perfect target. He built it to remind us that they were better. He all but told us "Look, here we are above you, we are better than you." So we made a statement of our own, that no matter how high he thinks he is, we can always shoot him down. And Captain Dowson will make sure off that."

The room looked at him as if he was a madman, which he was. *This is why Tomas Klein didn't share anything with us,* President Von Holt realized. He gestured for the security to take him away.

President looked at Admiral Weiss.

"Can we contact the other two ships?"

"The Bismarck has already surrender to Olympus. And I have already sent the recall to the Dauntless, they will turn back." He said somberly.

"And the Viking?" President asked.

"Based on their actions and the comments the Minister made, we can assume that the Captain of Viking is his man. That also explains why they are ignoring our comms." Admiral Weiss said.

President looked around the room.

"We need to get on damage control right away, contact the ambassador on the Moon. Let's hope that Olympus can resolve the situation. And also I want to know how the hell we didn't know about that warship."

Chapter Twenty-three

Adrian looked at the holo-desk, the dissident, or rather Concordis ship has surrender, and they identified themselves as Concordis warship Bismarck. They have turned off their engines and were currently firing their front thrusters in order to slow down. The intercept time on the board above the holo-desk was rapidly coming down. It now said 7 minutes. One of the other Concordis ships was in the process of turning around, while the last one kept coming, Adrian was studying it closely looking for any sign that it will turn and follow the first one, but with each passing minute he grew more and more certain that it would not.

Finally after three minutes Adrian was sure that they meant to ignore his warning.

"Weapons, target the remaining ship, ten missiles, five at the back, the rest spread out the ships length." Arian said. He didn't know much about the ship, but he knew that it had missile pods on its entire length, and he hoped to disable them and the ships drives.

"Captain! Missile launch from the Concordis vessel." Sensors said. Adrian shifted his eyes to the hologram, a moment later fifty missile tracks appeared, and all of them were targeting the Bismarck.

"Impact in six minutes."

"They are going to destroy their own ship." Bethany asked incredulous, Adrian filled her in about the Bismarck's crew when they surrendered.

"It looks so. Weapons, can we shoot down the missiles?" Adrian asked. They needed to keep that ship alive.

"No Ship Master, our missiles weren't designed to track targets so small. There is nothing we can do." Noah said regretfully.

"What about our railguns? Can we shoot the missiles down with them?" Adrian asked.

"In theory, but Adrian, we would need to fire them at the place where the missiles will be. It will take minutes to calculate based on the missiles track, I can't do it fast enough." Noah said.

Adrian tried to think about any other way, the Concordis ships didn't have any point defense, and firing their own missiles wouldn't work, they were all tracking missiles, and had evading capabilities. They might shoot down some, but not all.

"I can do it Adrian." Adrian heard Iris in his head.

"What?" he asked.

"I can do the calculations. But I will need access to the ships computer." Iris said. Adrian thought about it, but he couldn't see any other way.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, but you will need Bethany’s and yours codes in order to let me into the system, and they will know about me, I won’t be able to hide.” She said. Adrian made his choice, he trusted Iris.

Adrian turned to Bethany.

“Do you have any ideas?” He asked.

Bethany shook her head. “No.”

Adrian took a breath.

“I’m going to need you to trust me, and enter your command codes into the computer.” Adrian said.

“Why?” Bethany asked suspiciously.

“I have a way of saving that ship, but doing that will require allowing someone into the ships computer.” He said.

“Allowing someo—” Adrian interrupted her.

“Bethany, we need to protect that ship.” He looked at her imploring her to trust him.

“Alright.” She said, and entered sent her codes over her implant. Adrian did the same, and a then he gave Iris access to the ships computers.

“What the hell! Something took over my station!” Noah cried out.

“There is no need to panic Noah, she will do the calculations for the railguns.” Adrian said.

Both Bethany and Noah turned towards Adrian. “She?”

“Hello, my name is Iris.” Iris said over speakers.

“Adrian, what is this?” Bethany asked confused.

“Everyone, meet Iris.” Adrian said. “Iris, is an Artificial Intelligence” Adrian said.

“But, how? Where did she come from?” Noah asked.

Instead of answering Adrian just touched the side of his head. Noah looked even more confused at the gesture. But Bethany got it.

“Your implant.” Adrian simply nodded.

“I have the calculations, we need to fire in thirty seconds, or we will lose the window.” Iris said.

“Weapons, execute the targeting solution.” Adrian said.

“Yes Ship Master.” Noah said.

“And fire missiles at the Concordis ship.” Adrian renewed his previous order.

* * *

Captain Smith looked at his first officer totally helpless, the Viking has opened fire on his ship, and they had no way of defending themselves. The Bismarck’s hull was tough and thick, and Smith

hoped that they survived, but he knew there would be casualties. He should have never agreed to this mission, he knew that it was wrong, and yet he followed orders, to do otherwise would have been treason.

"Impact in seven minutes Captain." His weapons office said.

"Turn the bottom of the ship towards the missiles." Captain Smith ordered, the hull was the thickest there. He hoped that it was enough.

"Captain! The Olympus ship has opened fire."

"Good. At least the Viking won't get away unscathed." Captain Smith said.

"They fired missiles at the Viking, but sir, there is something else going into empty space." The sensor officer said confusingly. "The computer, can't make sense of it, it says that it is a meteor shower."

"Get me the tracks on that shower." Captain Smith said.

A few moments later he saw that the new tracks interjected with the missile path. After a few moments of studying the tracks Captain Smith exclaimed. "Those are ballistic weapons, Olympus ship is trying to shoot down the missiles!"

* * *

Athena's railguns turned as one, all pointed at an empty point in space, as one they started firing, in thirty seconds the railguns launched over five hundred metal shells at the fraction of the speed of light towards empty space, they were fired in such a way as to blanket the entire area, anything that crossed their path was going to be crushed with the kinetic force that would rip it apart. Six minutes later their path was interjected with fifty Concordis missiles. Missiles had evading capabilities, but their processors weren't fast enough to recognize the danger until it was too late. By the time the evading protocols were initiated twenty missiles were struck by metal shells, and ten more exploded, hit by the blasts created from the destroyed missiles, the remaining ten engaged their evading protocols, but Athena's targeting solution took every possible path in account, and the ten missiles were quickly destroyed by the defensive fire.

Six minutes before, after the railgun fire died down, Athena's missile tubes opened, and ten 20 kilotons missiles shoot of towards their target. The missiles were slower than railguns at short range, it will take them a little over eight minutes to arrive at their target.

* * *

"All missiles have been destroyed Captain." Vikings weapons

officer reported.

“The enemy missiles will reach us in two minutes Captain.” Sensor officer said.

Captain Dowson glared angrily at the screen. The Olympus ship had managed to destroy all of the missiles he sent at Bismarck, something that he believed was impossible just a few minutes ago. And to add to it that they launched ten missiles at his ship that he had no way of stopping. He wondered what the designers of this ship thought when they came up with it. Sure, they gave them thick armor, but no other defensive capability. He would have to have a talk with his superiors about that when he returned home. But for now he had a job to do.

“Target Olympus ship. Fire all missiles.” Dawson said calmly. Let’s see how they will deal with a full load of missiles.

* * *

The Viking’s missile pods opened and four hundred missiles left the ship on an intercept course towards the Olympus ship. Two minutes later the missiles that the Olympus ship fired reached the Viking, five missiles hit them spread out across the ship doing minor damage to the hull, and destroying the ships communication relay. The other five missiles struck the back of the ship, three missiles hit and damaged the drives, one failed to detonate, but the fifth one struck and penetrated inside the hull, the explosion ignited the ships fuel tank, and a moment later the Viking exploded in a blinding flash that lasted only a second as fire consumed all the air inside the ship. Captain Dowson didn’t live long enough to see all his four hundred missiles struck down by Athena’s railguns.

Chapter Twenty-four

"The Concordis ambassador came clean, they told us the truth, or rather a version of the truth." Tomas said. He was still in the meeting room that was now converted to a command room, Elias, Seo-yun, Laura and Nadia were all still there as well. It has been two hours since the Concordis ship surrendered to Ship Master Farkas, and Athena was currently escorting the ship to the Moon, Ship Master Farkas has put two security teams on the ship to make sure that nothing happens, but for now they were cooperating. Concordis leadership on the other hand was trying to shift the blame. They blamed their Minister of Defense, as the man who arranged for everything. Tomas managed to keep his cool, even though he was burning up inside. He still hadn't made any demands of Concordis, he didn't even contact them, it was them who initiated every conversation. Tomas knew that his lack of response was what scared them the most.

Other countries from Earth had also learned of what happened. Their reactions varied, the League was condemning Concordis action, while the Coalition condemned Olympus for having armed ships in space.

"It doesn't matter." Tomas said.

"What doesn't matter?" Seo-yun asked. Everyone in the room was shocked, they had just lost three hundred people.

"This." Tomas said gesturing around the room. "Them, us, everything. They will never change. And I can't do this anymore." Tomas said tiredly.

"Tomas, it's going to be alright." Elias said.

"No, it's not." Tomas closed his eyes. No one spoke for a few minutes. Laura quietly instructed the staff members to leave the room, leaving only Tomas and his closest friends in the room.

"Tomas." Laura started.

"I want you to call for a meeting. I want all the leaders of Earth to attend, we can hold it at Sedna." Tomas said interrupting her, he said a bit unsurely.

The others looked at each other.

"A meeting? Tomas are you sure? Is that the right move?" Nadia asked.

"Hmm, yes, I have something to tell them all. But first I need to do something… I need to speak with Olympus. With every member of Olympus. I need to ask them something, and then we will see about the conference. Can you arrange that for me?" Tomas asked Nadia. She started to respond but thought better of it and just nodded firmly

and said yes.

“Good, good. Seo-yun.” He said, turning his attention to her. “You said that you recovered charts, that the Alien ship made, scans of systems it visited on its journey?”

“Uhm, yes we have them.” She responded slowly.

“Good, I want you to do something for me.” Tomas said, conviction creeping back into his voice.

* * *

Three months later

Concordis President Lucas Von Holt sat in a comfortable chair in a large conference room in Sedna, The room was filled with leaders of every government in the world and their staff. Olympus limited them to four per party, and everyone agreed grudgingly, Tomas Klein and Olympus remained silent since the incident that took place three months ago. There was no retaliation, no prosecution, nothing, at least nothing on the political scene. On the other hand, every country from Earth that had the capability noticed an increase in Olympus activity. They have brought more ships to the Moon, more than anyone knew they had. At least five more warships were also confirmed orbiting the Moon, they started pulling people from their colony on the Moon, and dismantling the colony facilities and the station they had in orbit, and not just that, there was increase traffic from Sedna. There were no more people living here, only a bare minimum staff, everyone was sent out towards Mars. They knew that Olympus had facilities there, and apparently they were big enough to sustain their entire population. The scariest part was that no one knew the reason. Most believed that they were preparing for war.

He was brought out of his thoughts by the door opening. Tomas Klein entered the room, he was alone, and he made his way towards the speaking platform without a single glance at the people gathered here, when he reached the platform he looked around the room at all those gathered there. He spent a few minutes in silence, the other leaders and their advisors were discussing quietly among themselves. Russian president stood up and addressed Klein.

“Are we going to start this discussion or not? Why have you invited us here?” He asked, his voice was heard loudly and clearly through the speakers hidden throughout the room.

The others voiced their agreement, though not so loudly.

Tomas Klein looked around the room one more time before finally turning his gaze to the Russian ambassador.

“I did not invite you here to discuss things, you are all here only

as listeners, I will talk and you will listen." He said.

Tomas took a deep breath, and suddenly a text file appeared above every table in the room, and then he started talking.

"These are written confessions, one by Captain Reginald Smith of Concordis navy ship Bismarck, the other one is from Major Denis Taylor of Concordis army forces. These confirm that they were given orders by their superiors to execute a plan that resulted in the destruction of Cloud station, and deaths of three hundred Olympus citizens." Tomas turned to the Concordis party and President Von Holt felt his mouth go dry. "The plan was for them to acquire data about Olympus technology. I have been keeping Olympus technology from your hands, and you all held it against us, even though you would have done the same thing if the roles were reversed, although, you would have done it for a different reason." He looked around the room. "You resorted to violence and murder in order to obtain it. You did all that, when all you saw was technology that was barley a few years ahead of yours. And the sad thing is, that if you pooled your resources, if you set aside your differences, you would have been able to catch up to that technology in a few years at most. What you saw was only what we showed you, our technology is at least fifty years ahead of anything you have, and some even more. I never intended on keeping our advances from you, all I ever wanted was for humanity to become what I knew it could be. All you had to do, was learn to work together in peace, to care about your people and not your wallets. The moment you did that, I would have given you everything. But your actions have convinced me that you will not change any time soon, we went through a devastating war and still you couldn't see that if we continue on this path we will doom our entire race. My people and I have reached a decision, we will not wait for you anymore, we will not watch as you kill each other nor will we allow you to kill us. We are removing ourselves from the equation. Olympus will leave the Solar system, we will start a new life on another planet, far away from you and your stupidity." At that the room erupted. President Von Holt stared at Tomas Klein, he expected many things, but never this. Concordis has been preparing for war as the worst case option, they knew that there would be a response from Olympus. That is what they would do. And yet, leaving the Solar system? He knew that Olympus technology was better, but by that much? Perhaps if what Tomas was saying was the truth they could do it, and there was no reason for him to be lying about this. And then he realized what Olympus leaving would mean.

"What about our trade with Olympus? Earth is dependent on it." President Von Holt asked.

The rest of the room grew quiet and turned to look at him.

“I made a mistake all those years ago.” Tomas said regretfully. “I made you too dependent on Olympus, but the fault was not all mine, it was you who allowed it. It will be hard, but you will recover, if you work together. Our facilities on Earth are now yours to do with as you see fit. But we will not be leaving you our technology, we will dismantle or destroy anything that we can’t take with us.”

The League President stood up.

“You would throw the world into chaos and run away!?”

“I’m not running away. We are just tired of looking after you. Sometimes children need tough love. We showed you the way, it is up to you now to grow up.” With that he turned and left, the room immediately exploded into arguments, Von Holt heard that the topic of most of the arguments was the distribution of the Olympus facilities, and territory. They didn’t care that Olympus was leaving. *My god, he is right. We are children.* President Von Holt thought, he looked around seeing his staff members joining the yelling matches. He turned from them disgusted, he walked out of the conference room. There was no one around, no security officers that were there before. He walked down the corridors, and then took the elevator up to the surface. As he stepped into the bright light of the day, he saw that Olympus transport ships were gone, and then up in the distance he saw small black dots that were gone the next moment.

* * *

Two months later

Seo-yun sat in her office on the station orbiting Jupiter, she looked at the screen mounted on the wall, it showed the image from outside the station. Most of the screen was taken up by Jupiter, but there in the distance she could see four massive ships, they were still under construction, but it will take them only one more month to finish them. Most of Olympus fabricators were now working full time on their construction, the others were working on fabricating things that they will need for the long trip, mainly stasis chambers. It will take them just over a month to reach the number of stasis units for everyone. The last count put Olympus population at 7 and a half million. And every one of them had chosen to come with them. Five months ago, just after the incident, Tomas addressed all of Olympus citizens, some watched him live via FTL comm devices. Other watched as the signal got to them. He revealed everything. He told them about the alien ship they found, he told them about his childhood dream, he told them all of his plans, and Olympus listened in awe of this one man. A man who changed their lives, who made them better, who

wanted to do that for all of mankind, but couldn't fight against the corruption of the world. The feed went on for hours, he told them all of his fears, and all of his hopes, and he told them about all the advances, all the technology that they have, or were working on. He told them about the strides in genetics that will allow humans to live forever. He told them about his struggles, how he didn't know if he should give that technology to the Earth, how he feared that it would destroy them, because they were not mature enough to wield it. And then he told them how he didn't want to see any one of them die for the greed of others. He told them his plan, he told them that he wanted to leave this Solar system, Earth behind, and start over somewhere else. He asked them to come with him. And then he waited. The people talked with their families, their friends and their acquaintances. They sent him their response, every single one of them chose to leave with him, with the person who gave them so much.

Olympus was always run by Tomas, but even when they became independent, they still operated as a company. No more, the people have spoken, they made Tomas their ruler, their King, their President and their Emperor. They put their trust in him, knowing that it will be safe with him.

Olympus population moved to Mars, waiting there for the ships to be finished. The other ships that Olympus had were now retrofitted as transports that will take the population to the colony ships in a few trips. None of those ships will go with them, some will be scraped for materials, others destroyed, only the 8 warships that they had, will be fitted with stasis units and a hyperdrive, and come with them. The stations and shipyards they had in the system were already mostly dismantled or striped of all technology, their mining operations likewise.

Tomas had given the order for the genetic treatment to be administered to anyone who wished it, which was everyone, who didn't want to live forever? Seo-yun herself already had the treatment, somehow it didn't seem real yet, she looked the same, intellectually she knew that she would never change, and that she already had unlimited lifespan. But she didn't feel it.

Seo-yun turned her gaze from the four ships to the report on her desk. It was a regular update on the stasis units, and their construction progress. In a month Tomas would arrive to Jupiter, and then people would start arriving and be put into stasis, next time they woke up, they would be on an alien world, far away from Earth. She brought up the image of their future home. They found it in the alien charts. The aliens visited it. They classified it as an Earth like planet, with a gravity just a bit over Earth's at 1.1G's, orbiting one of the suns of the system, which was the same as our own Sol. The system itself was

completely inside a Nebula, there were two stars, the second one was a red dwarf, and six planets, two of which could be inhabited by humans, though one was a lot colder than the other. They chose the one that was warmer as their destination, the files said that there was life on the planet, though no life with higher intelligence, the world had a bit more land than Earth did but nothing drastic, so the climate should be very close to that of the Earth. The system also had one gas giant, about the size of Jupiter, and three more planets that were basically just rocks. There were also a lot of moons orbiting the gas giant, some of which had atmosphere, though the records didn't have any more information. The Nebula was 600 light years away, with their current hyperdrives moving at ten times the speed of light, it will take them around 60 years to get there. Most of them will spend the time in stasis, while others would be woken periodically to check on the stasis units and make sure that everything was alright.

Tomas didn't want to leave anything behind, but Seo-yun still had hope for the people on Earth. So she went behind Tomas's back, she left a ship in the asteroid belt, the hyper capable scout ship that they sent to Alpha Centauri, she equipped it with an FTL comm, she also put an Ai she trusted inside the ships computer, and gave him instructions to release the information and control of the ship only if he thought that those who found him deserved it, she also gave him the coordinates of the Nebula they will be leaving for, and then she powered it down, perhaps by the time the ship was found they would have learned to work together.

* * *

November 2103 – three months later

Adrian sat in the command chair of the Athena, Bethany was sitting beside him, and the rest of the command center was filled with the same people from seven months ago. The holo-desk showed the Athena leading the formation of seven other Olympus warships, in the middle of the formation were four enormous ships, 700 meters long, 50 tall and 350 wide, they were box shaped, slow and maneuvered poorly. They were made in haste and with only one purpose in mind, to get them to another world. They didn't have any wasted space, the stasis pods took over most of the ships room, with a small bridge, hyperdrives and sub-light engines taking over the rest. Each ship carried a little under 2 million people, with all the resources they would need to start on another world, their fabricators, food processing plants, and other things. Most of the population was already in stasis, even though they haven't yet left the Solar system,

and were just now approaching Saturn. There were still people who were awake on the colony ships making sure that everything was in order, making some final adjustments. They like those on the warships would go to sleep when they entered hyperspace. After that few of them would be periodically awakened, just like Adrian and his crew, though those on warships would wake more often. They, alongside a few from the colony ships would be awoken prior to their arrival in the Nebula. The system wasn't yet named, and would be only after they arrive. For now Adrian had to look forward to another four months of travel through the Solar system. It will be a long time before he and anyone else sets foot on a planet again.

Epilogue

February 2159 – 56 years later

The boy ran down the ruined streets of Berlin, it was once a great city, or so his father said in his stories, before he died. The boy was just 13 years old, and the city has been in ruins for at least thirty years, it was destroyed in the Great War that followed the Treason, when the lawbreakers stole Earth's technology and left them to starve. The Great War lasted for twenty years, and had decimated the Earth, The boy heard some stories, about how there were cities that survived, that still had technology, but Berlin was not one of those cities. Berlin was what was commonly referred to as a slum city. People who had no place to go came to those cities. They whored, stole, and killed to survive, but survive they did. Food was scarce, and there was no way for a 13 year old boy to survive in a slum city, other than by stealing.

The boy entered a building, it was abandoned so long ago that no one remembered what it was before, an old man who lived there before the boy and his crew moved in said that it was an "apartment building" whatever that is, the boy didn't know, nor did he care, it served them well now.

"It's, Mathias!" A girl of fourteen yelled out as he entered the first room. Just as he taught them the others came out of hiding, their weapons ready. They had few guns, but those were reserved for a real need, now they were armed with knives.

"Aileen." The boy, Mathias greeted the girl that led the other kids, she and Mathias led this crew together.

"You got something?" She asked hopeful.

Mathias grinned. "Of course!"

He reached for the pack on his back and showed its contents to everyone. The others all exclaimed in surprise, Aileen reached in and took out a can of food.

"Where did you find this?" She asked in awe, Mathias knew that she never before saw so much food in one place.

"I found one cache, there is more there, we need to gather everyone we can and go back, before someone else finds it too." Mathias said. Aileen nodded and started calling out to the others who were deeper inside the building when they were all startled by a powerful boom, followed by a sound unlike anything they have ever heard. Mathias and Aileen run outside and saw a cloud of dust rising in the distance, a long way from their city, then they noticed other such clouds rising from other directions as well. The noise kept growing stronger, and Mathias finally realized that it was coming from above them, he turned his eyes to the clear blue sky. There he saw

something slowly coming down. A few minutes later it set itself down a few building blocks away. He and Aileen moved immediately to investigate, as they came closer they started hearing screams and other unidentifiable noises. When they were finally close enough, they froze, what they saw was something unthinkable. People were dead, lying on the streets in pieces, or with holes blown through them. Others were being taken back to the thing that came down from the sky. The things that did the taking and killing, and they were things, not human, looked as giant red metallic spiders, at least at the first glance. They had four spider like legs, and a torso that looked vaguely human, they had two hands with three digits that ended in sharp claws, and their heads were elongated and covered in metal. Mathias realized that they were wearing armor, each of them had weapons built into the armor itself, and didn't carry any additional weapons. They were taking some people while killing the others. Mathias took Aileen's hand and started running, she was following his pace and soon they were just one street away from their hideout, just as they rounded a corner Mathias's vision was filled with red. A moment later he felt pain, and then nothing.

* * *

August 2169

Mathias sat down hard on his cot, he was exhausted. He had spent the last 4 years moving from asteroid to asteroid, mining ore for the blasted aliens. They had enslaved humanity, and placed their bases and people on Earth, they found our planet quite suitable for their needs. They used humans for manual labor, they sent us to mine materials for them, we built their buildings, we cleaned their houses, we were slaves on our own world. Many had tried to fight back at first, until the aliens, the Ra'a'zani put down the resistance by executing a third of the population. Since then there were no more attacks on the Ra'a'zani, the resistance went underground, and they let their tendrils out, they waited and watched. Mathias was a part of the resistance, though he kept the fact mostly to himself and those few that already knew, there were humans who collaborated with the enemy, and you never knew if one of your own would betray you. Mathias's job was to watch and listen for anything that might help them in their fight against the Ra'a'zani.

"Mathias." He heard someone call him, he turned and saw Gloria, she was also in the resistance, and she was twenty six years old, three years older than Mathias.

"Gloria." Mathias greeted her.

“We got a message, there will be a distraction in an hour, and we are getting out.” She whispered excitedly. Mathias was shocked, the resistance rarely helped people escape. They were usually too useful in their positions as slaves. And Mathias knew that he wasn’t special, and that there had to be a good reason for them getting him out.

“Do you know why?” He asked.

“They got a tip about something deeper in the asteroid field, and want us to investigate. Apparently it is something interesting enough to warrant a look, but not enough for them to send a team. So they are sending us.” She said.

“How are we getting out?”

“Don’t know all the details, the message just said that we will be given orders to board a shuttle and take some machinery to the other mining station, when we take off they will shut down their sensors, and we are to disappear.” She said. Ra’a’zani rarely kept a close guard on those working on the asteroids, there really wasn’t a place that they could run to. And if you do escape you better hope you run out of food and die before they find you.

“Alright, how will we know where to go?” Mathias asked.

“The shuttle will have the coordinates already programed in.” She said.

Mathias thought for a moment. The resistance would need to have someone on the inside in order to pull this off. And since there wasn’t a chance in hell that a Ra’a’zani would betray their own, that meant a collaborator. It made sense, there were humans that had greater access than the other slaves. The resistance would have been stupid not to insert their own into them. Mathias just didn’t want to think about what that person had to do to prove himself to the Ra’a’zani. He shuddered as he remembered the stories.

“Ok.” He said. An hour later, they got the order from their Ra’a’zani overlord to take a spare part to the mining station a few hours away. They got into the shuttle, and got on their way as planned. They waited for any sign that they were safe to turn away from the course, and then they lost all communications with the station.

“I guess that means go.” Gloria said.

Mathias changed course and started towards the coordinates programed in the shuttle, after putting in the course, he deleted the coordinates. They spent the next few hours on going deeper into the asteroid field. The only thing they saw out of the cockpit were rocks. They were now deep enough that the interference was big enough so they couldn’t be detected. Mathias suddenly grinned, he was free. He looked at Gloria and saw the same expression on her face. He knew that they might die. The shuttle had food for only a few days, and if

they don't get picked up by resistance they would be forced to either starve or go back. But it didn't matter to Mathias, he would never go back, he would rather die free.

"Look, is that it?" Gloria pointed. Mathias followed the direction she was pointing at. At first he didn't see anything and then he noticed it.

"Is that a ship?" He asked slowly.

Gloria only nodded, not taking her eyes from the ship they were now approaching, Mathias didn't see her nod, as he also kept his eyes glued to the ship.

"That's not Ra'a'zani." Gloria said.

"No."

They spent the next few minutes trying to find a way in, and then finally they found an access hatch. The Ra'a'zani shuttle had adaptive hatch tube, so they managed to dock with the ship. When they entered, the first thing they noticed was that the air was stale, then as they stepped deeper inside, the lights came on. Immediately they noticed writing on the wall, it was a schematic of the ship, showing all the compartments and the routes to them.

"This is written in English!" Mathias exclaimed.

"Wait, it think that this is its name "Olympus Exploration Ship Star Gazer"." Gloria read of the bottom. And then frowned. "What's Olympus?"

"I have no idea." Mathias said. "This says bridge, let's go take a look."

Two minutes later they entered the bridge, it was powered down like the most of the ship.

"Do you think that it still works?" Gloria asked.

Mathias opened his mouth to respond, when the light turned on, suddenly there was a figure standing in the corner on a small floorplate, it looked human, but for a second before the image sharpened, Mathias could swear he saw an alien with four hands.

"The ship is still operational." The newcomer said.

Gloria jumped back. "What the hell!" She exclaimed.

"Relax Gloria, that's a hologram, the Ra'a'zani have them as well." Mathias said.

He then turned to the hologram. "Hi, mind telling me who you are." He asked, he reasoned that it was an interactive program, probably modeled on another person.

"My designation is Autonomous Survey Unit Mark 77321, but my friends gave me the name Asumy."

* * *

May 2164

Tomas Klein was the first one to step foot on the new world, there was only around a thousand of them who were awake, there was no need to wake the others until they build the structures for them to live in. They chose a high plateau for their landing, and also for the spot of their first city, it had ample access to water, and was on the part of the planet with a mild climate. Tomas looked at the night sky, it was a lot different than Earth, there were no stars, and the night sky had a teal tint to it, with streaks of purple and red, it was the Nebula, and it completely surrounded the system. The few bright spots in the sky were the other planets in the system. The two small moons that orbited the planet were a lot smaller than the Earth's Moon, but were a lot closer, and so appeared bigger. He looked around, it was dark with only the light from the transport illuminating the surroundings. He knew from the images they took earlier, that the plant life had a teal tint to it instead of green as on Earth, and that trees tended to grow much higher than those back home. *No, this is home now.* He corrected himself. The air was of the same composition as on Earth, but without the pollution, it had a sweet taste to it. He took a deep breath. *Yes, this will be a good home.* Seo-yun walked out of the transport to stand beside him. She looked around taking in as much as she could.

"Any thoughts on a name?" She asked.

"Yes." Tomas said. "Let's call it Sanctuary."

Author's note

Olympus is the first book in the Rise of the Empire series, it sets stage and introduces characters for the main storyline in the series, and it is the beginning of the journey that will see humanity become a true galactic Empire.

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